

Against All Odds

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Summary: A young boy is brought from the ruins of Aquilium to Onyx to train as a Spartan. From training to the battle of Earth and beyond, this is his story. *Note: I am currently updating this story. No more chapters will be added until I complete the updatin I will update with the latest chapter I have completed here. Sorry for the inconvenience! Latest Chapter Update: Chapter 11 (2/1/16)

1. The Jump

****I do not own Halo, Bungie, 343, and Microsoft do. All original characters belong to me. All other characters mentioned, such as those in Halo: Ghosts of Onyx, do not belong to me.****

****The Jump****

****2400 Hours, September 29, 2543****

****Onyx, Unknown Location****

I watched the trees fly by as the drop ship soared through the sky. I could almost imagine that they were the forests from my home planet, with my house just over the next hillâ€¦ but I knew that was impossible. Aquilium was gone.

I'd been forced to watch as the Covenant had burned the planet to ash, along with my family. The planet had slowly turned a deep red as the monsters burned the surface until it was covered in plasma. Our transport, covered by a single UNSC frigate, had narrowly escaped. We jumped into slipspace and forced ourselves away from the small windows on-board. Slowly, we tapered out into our own groupsâ€¦ all but me, that is. I had been staring out the window still, remembering the dull red glow of my home, the only place I had known.

When we arrived at a dock on Reach, a man dressed in a dark, jet black uniform had asked me if I wanted some revenge. When I looked into the man's dark eyes, I was reminded a little of the monsters back on Aquilium. But when I remembered my family, I clenched my hand

into a fist and slowly nodded. Within a couple of days, I was placed on a new ship with hundreds of other kids, like me. One by one, they placed us into metal and glass tubes and put us to sleep. When we woke up, we were ordered onto nearby Pelican drop ships and were promptly delivered to the surface of a new planet. The adults in my Pelican called it Onyx.

When we had landed, a tall man had introduced himself- I still couldn't remember his name- and then another, shorter, and much angrier looking man ordered us back onto the Pelicans. This led me to where I was now- riding a Pelican at supersonic speeds easily a thousand meters from the ground.

A man dressed in a dark green outfit grabbed a megaphone that was hanging from his belt and started to yell into it to be heard over the wind blowing by the open back hatch.

"Alright maggots! You see those packs over there on that rack? Grab 'em!"

All of the children aboard, including me, shuffled and bumped their way over to the rack and grabbed the packs. We all turned to face him again.

"Boys and girls, we're going for a little jump!" The man yelled as he grabbed hold of the edge of the ship. "Strap on your packs like so!"

He demonstrated how to put the packs on properly and then returned to his yelled instructions as everyone fumbled with their straps and clips on the backpacks. I struggled at mine; still not quite believing that it was harder to put on than my school backpack. I finally got it set the right way and quickly turned my attention to the instructor again.

"When you jump, count to three and then pull the handle on your left by pulling it across your chest!"

He showed the action, pretending to pull down on the red handle on the left side of his chest.

"Just remember, if you can't do this, then you can't be a Spartan!"

I clenched my hand into a fist again in determination. Then I looked down. My insides turned to ice. We were hundreds of meters in the air, just at the point where trees looked like toothpicks and fields looked like blocks of bright green. I backed away from the edge quickly, heart thumping a mile a minute. I hadn't told anybody except for my now dead sister that I was afraid of heights.

"Alright, form a line!" The drill sergeant barked. We all obeyed immediately- except for me. I slowly dragged my feet into the line and stood very still; trying not to move, or else I would be blown out the back of the Pelican by the howling wind.

Despite my attempt to stay in the back of the line, I actually found myself near the front of the line, just behind the fourth person. I could almost imagine that my knees were knocking together in fear. There was a pause, and then the first kid looked up at the man and

took a deep breath, as though he was going to jump into the deep end of a pool.

"Go!" The man yelled. The boy simply stepped off the ramp with no sound and disappeared into the night sky. "Next!"

A small, scrawny little kid crawled on his hands and knees to the edge, looked down, squeaked loud enough for me to hear over the howling wind. "Go!" The boy jumped and did a sort of somersault off the edge and he too disappeared.

Another boy, much taller than any of the rest of us, stood at the edge now. "Go!" He looked down, nodded, and promptly jumped with a slight smile on his face. I shuddered. How could he be so calm?

The girl ahead of me stepped forward and stopped. She glanced back at me and caught my eye. Her fearless blue eyes caught my terrified green glanced back at the drill sergeant. "Go!" She smiled, took a running start, and she was gone. "Next!"

My turnâ€¦

I shuffled to the edge nervously and glanced down. The trees looked less like toothpicks now, and more like tall spikes that I would fall on if I jumped. "Go!" At that instant, a million horrible ways of dying flashed before my eyes: falling into the engine somehow, getting impaled on a tree, tripping on the deck as I jumped and landing on my head, the parachute not workingâ€¦. The list was endless. I shut my eyes. There was no way I could do this. I wasn't going to become a Spartan.

I jumped back into the Pelican, covering my eyes and screaming in fear, yelling "No way! You're crazy!"

No one made a sound. Then the instructor barked out "Next!"

I shuddered. I had failed the test! I would never be a Spartan. There was no way I could ever be able to fight the monsters who had killed my family. I felt tears sting in my eyes briefly before blinking them away.

Once again, the instructor shouted over the still wailing winds: "Next!"

Then, almost barely above the howl of the wind, I heard one kid's voice whisper in my ear. "You can do it. C'mon. Jump!"

I clenched my teeth. Before I could even think, I leaped from the ground, past the line of other recruits, past the instructor, and launched myself into the inky darkness of the sky and the howling maw of the icy winds.

****Update:** I have updated this chapter significantly. For those who know how the first version was, please tell me what you think. As always, R&R.**

2. Free Falling

****2440 Hours, September 29, 2542****

****Onyx, Unknown Location****

I bet getting pushed out of a flying vehicle going at almost supersonic speeds sucks pretty bad. Let me tell you from personal experience, it's worse when you know that you just made yourself jump. Also, it gets worse if you are afraid of heights. Which I am. Did I forget that tiny detail? Well, there you go.

The wind whistled by in a drawn out, eerie moan as I plummeted toward the green carpet underneath me. It tore at my standard issue black fatigues and my pack and forced me into a violent somersault. The air was so cold, it felt like I was being pelted with icicles. I felt around for the handle of the parachute, but couldn't find it. My eyes widened as I reached what looked like less than five hundred feet of the ground. Then, all of a sudden, I felt a hard handle, pulled, and I was yanked backward and into the crisp night air.

The straps of the pack bit into my shoulders, and I winced in pain. Then I realized what it meant, and glanced up. The bright yellow parachute fluttered and caught the air as I smoothly began to fall back down earth again. I almost laughed in exhilaration. I made it! I think I actually whooped and pumped my fist in the air. I held onto the chords for dear life as an open and inviting green field panned into my vision and got closer at every second.

There was a loud bump and crash, and I was on the ground covered in fluorescent yellow. I tried to move, but the wall of yellow surrounding me stopped me. I'll admit it, I started to freak out. Every time I tried to move my hand, it was stopped by the sea of fluorescent yellow.

"Help! Someone help me!"

That continued for a bit. It was probably about twenty minutes that I was doing this. Yeah, not one of the proudest moments in my life. Then, I heard quiet footsteps run over to where I was at and heard a soft voice whisper, "Shhh! Don't worry man, I gotcha."

I calmed down and stared curiously at where the voice had come from. I recognized that voice. That's the same voice I heard on the drop ship! I thought as I felt a hand reach down and attempt to pry open my yellow cocoon. It started to give until there was a small gap in between the edges of the material. I put my hands on the edges and started to help push. The chute gave even more, and the next thing I knew, I was breathing the cold night air again. I lay there, gasping for breath, as a dark, tall figure leaned up from the parachute wreckage and stretched.

After I had quit acting like a fish out of water, I started to try to make out my savior through the oppressive darkness. I could only make out his jet-black hair. He reached out a hand and yanked me off the ground.

"C'mon, I think I heard some of the men over in that field over there," The kid said as he turned to the left and led the way through the trees.

"Thanks," I said, my voice sounding really small.

"Don't mention it. My name is Jacob. What's yours?"

"Darren."

"Well, nice to meet you, Darren," Jacob said as he pulled a branch out of the way to reveal a line of drop ships parked in the middle of a field. Lights were on top of post, shining down and lighting up the ground. I looked around and saw other yellow parachutes surrounding the field in all directions. Some of the kids were yelling and running around as the instructors tried to catch them. We both chuckled as one of them managed to hide on the other side of some bushes as a drill sergeant hurried by following the path the kid had been traveling, just like in a chase scene from one of those cartoons on a holovid.

I glanced closer at the kid and noticed that it was the same one who had saluted as he jumped. Even as I watched, another instructor found him and he started running again, laughing while he did it, while the frustrated and tired man tried to catch him. _At least he's having fun._

As soon as we stepped into the clearing, an instructor walked up to us with a wary look on his face.

"Head over to those Pelicans and wait for us to finish up here," he growled.

We looked at him in confusion. The others were having fun, so why couldn't we?

"Now!"

We still stared at him blankly, silently daring him to try to make us get on. Why should we have to listen to him?

The man groaned. "I don't have time for this crap."

He pulled out a black rod, pressed a button on it, and swung it at me. My vision disappeared as every part of my body erupted into painful electricity. Those electrical rods really pack a wallop.

As soon as I caught my breath from the sudden attack, we took off pretty fast towards the Pelicans. I guess I got my reason to listen to him. We waited for what felt like an hour, but I guess that it really was only about fifteen minutes. The kids had started walking very solemnly towards the Pelicans, as if they knew that this was their last time with any freedom. Even the clown from earlier had a frown on his face.

The drill instructors followed after them, wearing expressionless masks that showed nothing at all. After we had all filed in, the leader of the camp we were about to go back to stood up in front of us. I think his name was Ambrose.

"Congratulations." He barked. "You all just got admitted into the Gamma series of the SPARTAN III program. You are now Spartans!"

We had all been staring dumbly at him until we all heard the last sentence. There was a bit of muttering, but the instructors activated

their rods and everything quieted down. I apparently wasn't the only one to suffer the wrath of the men in green.

"You will all be brought back to base for a bit of shuteye, and then wake up at 0600. File into the Pelicans. Dismissed!"

The time was 0130.

Darnit.

3. Day One

0400 Hours, September 30, 2542

Onyx, Unknown Location

"_Darren! Darren!"_

_I looked around and saw my twelve year-old sister trying to make her way to me through the people running through the streets, trying to get away from the monsters. _

_I tried to move, but for some reason, I couldn't. One of those, _things_, turned toward my sister._

I saw what looked like a blue light fly into my sister's back, and my sister fell to the ground, smoke curling from a blackened and charred hole on her back. I screamed and screamed and screamed. I yelled her name over and over again.

"_Sarah!"_

My parents were lying next to her. I hadn't been able to see them through the crowd.

I called out to them too, but they didn't move either.

I heard a loud whooshing sound and turned. Another blue light was heading right for me! I tried to move, but once again, my legs wouldn't cooperate. The light hit me in the chest.

I howled in pain and fell writhing to the ground.

My entire body was on fire!

I yelled as I felt the energy surge through my body. Then, to top it off, my shudders and jerks of pain made me fall off my bed and onto the hard, cold floor. Fun.

A drill instructor leaned over me as I groaned in pain.

"Did you have a nice nap?" He asked with relish as he brandished his stick for another whack, just in case I didn't get up immediately. Which I couldn't because I was freaking suffocating.

Zap!

I took off then, running to the trunk that stood in front of my bunk and opened it. Inside, there were some neatly folded black fatigues

with some writing on it.

Darren-G128.

I put them on and followed the other kids outside. It still felt like the tingle of electricity was still arcing its way through my body. The drill instructor followed close behind me as I exited the breathing. I felt a sudden burst of adrenaline as he once again brought the baton towards. I began to jog to where the others had crowded around, waiting for instructions.

A gray-haired instructor stood outside in the middle of a grassy field. I think his name was Mendez.

As soon as we reached the edge of the grass the man barked, "Form lines with ten in each row! Now!"

We hurried to obey. After some confusion, a few whacks from the instructors, and some kids running into each other, we finally got all sorted into what he had asked.

"Alright, one hundred jumping jacks! One! Two! Three!" Mendez started counting out jumping jacks, jumping in place with the rest of us.

We all started, and pretty soon, we were all sweating. The sun on Onyx seemed to be extra hot today. As soon as Mendez reached fifty, I started to feel the burn. I'd never done jumping jacks like this before at school! This was a whole new level of torture.

Some of the chubbier kids were already starting to get tired, but some of the instructors ran up to give them some motivation. Thank goodness I was good at gym. This wasn't gym though.

"Ninety nine! One hundred! Sit-ups!"

We all groaned and got into the sit-up position and started in.

We knew whenever someone couldn't keep up. There would be a loud yelp, and then silence, and we would know that another candidate had been put in their place. I saw Jacob hunch over and puke out his guts on the warm grass. This didn't earn him a reprieve though. As soon as he had finished, a drill instructor swooped down on him like a hawk and delivered a shock.

"Pushups! One! Two! Three! Four!" Without remorse, Mendez fell onto his chest, counting out once more. He wasn't even freaking sweating!

I couldn't keep up. My underdeveloped arms tried to keep up, but I could tell that I was falling behind. An instructor walked up and watched me. It was the same man from earlier who had hit me with the electric rod. He smiled sinisterly and put a hand on his rod while I struggled.

When I saw that smile, I knew one thing. I could not let him win. I started to go even harder, looking at him with what I hoped was a defiant expression, but I think it was more of a grimace. I didn't even glance around anymore. I just looked at him with as much hate as I could.

"Stop!"

I literally collapsed to the ground. The only thing I could hear was the labored breathing of all of the recruits as we lay down on the soft, warm, dew covered grass. We stayed like that for at least one minute.

"Alright recruits! Get up! We're going on a run!"

We all moaned in pain as we tried to get up. More zaps were heard as those who were too slow were smacked with electricity. My instructor from earlier gave me less than .5 seconds before he started to lay into me with the rod. I was up in one second flat.

We took off.

I don't know how long we ran. It felt like hours. We ran through the forest, through a stream, down a road, and down the fence around the base. Finally, we returned to the barracks, where we all collapsed on the spot. Mendez simply stretched his arms out and looked at us with one of the cruelest expressions I've ever seen.

"Well, recruits, that was a good warm-up. Now, on your feet!"

I didn't even have the strength to moan. Was he a machine or something?

Six hours laterâ€|

I didn't even have the strength to move as I saw the instructor with the rod stride toward me with an evil grin on his face. I decided that I wouldn't react, no matter what he did to me.

Zap! One. _Zap!_ Two. _Zap!_ Three.

Again and again the shock went through my body, but it felt like I was in a dream, and the pain was at the back on my mind. I could hear the instructor swearing and yelling at me to get up, but I lay as still as I could.

Suddenly, I heard a loud, gruff voice yell "Instructor Gunnison! That is enough! I think it's pretty obvious that this child is not getting up."

"Y-yes s-sir! I was just thinking that sir." I heard him stutter.

"Then why do you keep hitting him like a dead horse, son?" I heard the older man say in a deadly tone.

"Iâ€| I don't know sir."

"Well, in that case, take a jog round the base. Ten laps should be good enough to think it over."

"Sir yes, sir!"

I heard the thudding of grass, and then silence, save for the other children throughout the clearing who were still trying to catch their breath from the sudden exercise of the day. I glanced up. Above me

was Mendez, looking as calm and removed as he did when he was ordering us to do exercises. He gave me a long, hard look, and then walked away.

"Follow me to the Schoolhouse, maggots!" I heard him say.

Oh great, school. I sighed as we marched across the yard. I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw Gunnison start jogging around the base. I smiled as I turned back to the building ahead of us. At least something had gone well today.

4. School and Games

****1300 Hours, September 30, 2542****

****Onyx, Unknown Location****

We entered the schoolhouse single file, still muttering and catching our collective breath. I got a seat in the back of the class, right next to Jacob.

"Soâ€| thatâ€| sucked," he wheezed, still trying to catch his breath.

"Yeah," I said, "Notâ€| fun."

As we sat there, we were given graham crackers and milk. I wanted to hold onto mine, but it tasted so good that I had already gulped down the milk and had already started gnawing on the last few crackers by the time everyone had finally found their seat. Graham crackers were far from my favorite, but beggars couldn't be choosers. And I was definitely begging.

As I finished my last cracker, a blue light filled the room. A man appeared, dressed in full battle dress of what I assumed from lessons in school was what Native Americans looked like on Earth thousands of years ago.

"Welcome. I am the AI Endless Summer. I will be your teacher during your class time hours during training."

The other kids in the class kept talking. I shot a sideways glance at Jacob, who simply shrugged.

The AI stood impassively at the front of the classroom. Eventually, everyone stopped talking and looked at him.

He spoke again: "Oh, I suppose you will allow me to teach now?"

The kids in the room stared intensely at him, most not even blinking now.

"Thank you," the construct said, standing stiffly with his arms crossed.

"Let us begin."

The holoprojector table lit up and began to show a 3D battle of a group of men in armor with swords and spears fighting a larger group

of men in different armor. The first group of men was greatly outnumbered, but they seemed to be holding their own. The entire class crowded around the table, watching intently as the soldiers began to push the larger enemy back until they finally broke and ran, leaving the men victorious.

"Those men are Spartans." Endless Summer said. " They are the best soldiers that humanity has ever created until recently. In ancient Grecian times, they held a small pass against thousands of Persians with only three hundred men. And someday, you will be even stronger than they were. The red men are the Persians, while the blue are the Spartans."

The red virtually surrounded the few blue, but somehow, the Persians could not break through. The warriors, with their backs to the pass, were too skilled, leaving no gaps in their line for the Persians to use for advantage. Their wall of shields and spears was too well-covered and too tight-knit to fail.

Endless Summer continued: "Notice their teamwork, communication, and skill as they battle a far more numerous enemy. It does not matter about the size or the strength of a soldier. With skill, one can easily take out many enemies with as little effort as slicing a knife through butter. With communication, a team can smash through or form into any fortification. With teamworkâ€|

The AI stopped and looked at us as the latest force of attacking Persians fell.

"Well, I believe we will be showing you more of those benefits soon enough."

2 hours laterâ€|

We all funneled out of the Schoolhouse to a waiting Mendez.

"Alright cadets, let's go for another jog!"

We all moaned as the other instructors forced us into lines.

We headed back around the fence and across the bridge from earlier, but instead of going back through the woods like I expected, Mendez had us follow the street all the way until it ended at a large, asphalt field full of metal obstacles, monkey bars, and climbing walls. We all looked at the place with glee, because we knew from experience in recess that a race was most likely imminent.

Mendez turned and faced us as we caught our breath.

"Cadets, welcome to the playground! What we have here for us today is a little race. Winners are anyone who rings the bell in the tower before the last team."

An instructor raised his hand.

Mendez pointed at him.

"Sir," the man asked ruefully, "what happens to the last team?"

Mendez looked at him with a look that almost seemed like sick glee. I realized with horror that he actually wanted someone to ask that question.

"Why, they lose their dinner, Thompson."

Everyone stared at him like he had just announced that someone was about to be executed.

Mendez continued, unperturbed by the looks of outrage and anger that were focused on him.

"We will split you up into teams of six, and when I blow my whistle, the race will start. Understood?"

We all nodded our heads.

My group wasn't the best, but I saw a few other groups that were worse off. We had a small, skinny kid about two-thirds my size (and I'm pretty small), a blonde-haired girl who kept on blabbing on about how they weren't calling her by her name, the joker from the drop who actually seemed to be a good addition, and another girl with brown hair who seemed to be at ease with the group, chatting with the small boy. The main thing that I liked was that Jacob was put in my group.

As soon as he walked over, he looked at each of us and looked at the obstacle course.

"Well, it looks like we're a team. We should at least know more about each other. What are your names?"

The joker looked up from his conversation with the blonde girl and gave Jacob a glance over.

"Simon."

The brunette girl looked up and said her name too.

"Hannah. Pleased to meet you!"

I smiled. She seemed nice.

The blonde girl, without even glancing at us, said, "Kara."

The small boy looked at all of us in turn, as if he was already making up his mind about what kind of people we were. When we looked to him for his name, he started and squeaked his name out.

"A-austin."

I looked up and everyone's eyes were on me. I blushed a little as I managed to utter out, "Darren."

"Well it's great to meet you guys, I'm Jacob. Now that we all know each other, who is the fastest here?"

Simon raised his hand. "I was the fastest one in my class. No one could touch me unless I let them."

Jacob nodded.

"Alright then, Simon, you need to grab one of those lifts over by the tower as fast as you can. I think I see one that goes to the top. Do you see it?"

He pointed it out to Simon and he nodded.

"There isn't room for all of us though. Austin, Kara, and Simon will be on that lift. There's another lift nearby that one that take us to the second level. You'll need to grab that one, Darren. That lift will have Hannah, Darren, and me in it. If we work together, this should be a piece of cake."

We all nodded. It seemed like a solid plan.

"I think he's about to blow the whistle guys," Jacob said as he turned around again.

"We'd better get ready."

I went down into a track stance that I had often seen on the playground on Aquilium.

Here we go.

Mendez brought the whistle to his lips and blew.

5. Teamwork

****1600 Hours, September 30, 2542****

****Onyx, The Playground****

Of course, the first step I took, everything went wrong.

Right off the bat, Austin tripped and went sprawling into Kara. She let out a yelp as he pulled her down with him. Only one step in, and we had already lost a third of our team. By the time I was a quarter of the way to the lift, they still hadn't gotten up.

Simon burst ahead with a great surge of speed, leaving the others and me in the dust. He disappeared into the haze of dust that was being kicked up by everyone as all teams collectively rushed the playground.

Jacob was somewhere behind me, wheezing and trying to keep up.

By the time we reached the lifts, another team had already taken them and were a decent height off of the ground.

"Maybe next time, losers!" one of them shouted as they made their ascent.

Jacob, Austin, Kara, and Hannah finally managed to catch up to me as I looked up hopelessly at the still ascending team.

"Well, I got nothing now," Jacob said as the other team reached the

top and rang the bell.

Besides the team on the lift, the other kids were having a rough time. They kept on falling into the icy water underneath a wooden bridge in their haste to reach the bell. But they all still had a head start over us.

The best laid plans, I thought as we looked frantically for a way up.

Then we heard a voice from above us.

"Hey guys!"

We turned to the voice.

Simon was already two levels up on the tower and was currently waving at us with glee on his face.

"I found a ladder on the other side! I was the only one using it! C'mon, I'll help you guys up!"

We all rushed around the side of the tower. Sure enough, there was the rope ladder.

Simon laid down on his stomach and reached out.

"C'mon! Grab my hand!"

We gave Austin a boost first, since he was the smallest, then Hannah, then Kara, and finally Jacob.

As I helped push him up, a kid ran around the corner and bowled over me, yelling "Hey guys! Over here! I found a way up!"

I hit the ground with a loud _oof! _I felt my bicep hit something sharp, and my whole left arm erupted in fire. I raised my arm until it was pulled off of whatever it had just been stabbed by. I looked underneath my arm and saw a jagged piece of rusted metal covered in red.

I screamed in agony as my wound met the open air.

As the boy tried to climb up, Jacob, who was near the top, lashed out with his foot and kicked him in the face.

The kid dropped like a rock. I gotta admit, I felt a little satisfaction when he hit the ground.

I rushed back over and thrust out my right hand. Jacob took it, and with everyone heaving, I was pulled up.

I looked back and saw the kid being helped up by his teammates, a look of pure hate on his face. I stuck out my tongue at them.

When I turned to leave, I could feel a warm liquid running down my arm. I saw the crimson dripping onto the wood beneath my feet. I tried to ignore it, but Hannah wasn't having any of it.

Hannah looked at me in horror and said, " Darren, you're hurt!"

I felt the side of my arm. I winced, but now that the metal was out of the arm and I was used to the air blowing past the wound, it didn't feel so bad.

"I'll be fine, don't worry about it," I said as we rushed up the stairs to the next story.

We kept on running up the staircase until we reached the landing with the bell. A bunch of the children were still on the bridge fighting it out. The team that had taken the lifts earlier were at the bottom by now, standing near Mendez.

My arm gave an extremely painful throb and I doubled over in pain, clutching my arm.

Austin turned to face me and asked, "Are you okay?"

I nodded, clenching my teeth.

"Yeah, I just need to make it down and I'll be fine."

I glanced back. Behind me was a trickling trail of red, leading all the way back to the ladder. I shuddered. May I did need help.

Austin, the smallest of us all, offered his hand.

"You look like you're having a hard time. C'mon, let me help you."

The others turned to us.

Soon, they had all surrounded me and were practically dragging me to the bell.

We each rang the bell and slid down a slide we saw near the back of the tower. My shoulder felt like it was on fire.

Mendez was waiting at the bottom. He looked at us, made a check on his check board, and turned his attention back to the kids on the wooden bridge.

Without looking at us, he said, "Nichols! Escort Cadet G128 to the infirmary. His arm looks like it needs tending to."

A drill instructor marched up and saluted Mendez. Then he said, "Follow me," and tersely walked back to the building.

I looked back at the team, and they all gave me a thumbs up. I nodded in thanks and turned back to the instructor leading me and stumbled trying to catch up to him.

Maybe my team wasn't so bad after allâ€¦

****Authors Note: ****

****I realize that there are some obvious similarities between this book and **_**The Fall of Reach.**_** There is a reason for this. I believe that, although the Spartan IIIs were trained faster than the**

Spartan IIs, I believe that they would receive the same type of training due to Kurt Ambrose's desire to protect the cadets, but in a condensed and faster form. Since I am not trying to copy the book (what would the point be?), there are going to be definite differences in ****_**how**_**** the cadets react to the challenges ahead of them. And trust me, I have more challenges ahead of my motley group of cadets. Thank you for reading! Read and Review!
******Constructive****** criticism is encouraged.**

6. Eclipse

****2000 Hours, July 9, 2549****

****Onyx, Unknown Location****

The hot jungle of Onyx was steaming in the late afternoon. I was surrounded by a mosaic of green, some dark, some light. The soft, wet dirt underneath me felt like a warm bed, so it was pretty easy to sink into it in my prone position. Moisture was thick all around me, and on top of that, it had just started raining again, making a soft pattering sound above me and dropping warm, wet water onto me.

Perfect. I thought to myself as a bolt of lightning flew through the sky. _That should help keep us out of sight._

I looked down at my rifle, a MA5C, one of my favorite weapons. I racked the chamber to make sure there was a bullet in it, and then cradled it in my arms. They were only TTR stun rounds, but they still packed a wallop. I reached down to make sure our stun grenades from the taken out instructors were okay and out of the mud. I wasn't sure if they would be affected by these conditions, but it was better safe than sorry.

A clap of thunder sounded above us. The storm was getting closer.

"Jacob?" I whispered.

I saw a prone form move ahead of me to turn around. "Yeah?"

"How do we know this is gonna work? Are we just banking on the rain to help us out?"

"Well, there is that," Jacob replied. "Also, I'm seriously doubting that these instructors are paying much attention. I think that one by the tree over there is actually asleep." I took the binoculars, also stolen, from Jacob. Sure enough, there was an instructor leaning against a tree and lightly snoring about thirty meters away. I held back a laugh as I handed the binoculars back to Jacob.

"Do you think Austin and Simon already got it done?" I asked as I squinted through the rain at the instructor.

"Well, if they did, they would have already set off the signal, right?"

I nodded.

"Then don't worry about it. You seem really tense."

I nodded again. "Sorry, I just want it to go well. Whatever they're doing to--"

Jacob cut me off. "Don't worry, 'Romeo'. We'll get her back."

I blushed, which luckily Jacob was not able to see.

And we waited, the darkness closing in and the rain pouring down harder than before. The torrent of water cascading down onto us would make most people uncomfortable, or at the very least, annoyed.

But not us. We were better than that.

Finally, we saw a soft light ahead of us, winking on and off.

"All right Darren, it's party time," Jacob said as he readied his submachine gun as quietly as he could.

We both rose as one and took aim at our targets.

A flash of lightning burst to life, painting the ground with bright greens and browns, and the ground rumbled as the boom of the thunder surrounded us.

I fired a round into the guy sleeping on the tree. He slumped over and fell face-first into the mud, not even knowing what had hit him. I took aim at another instructor, this time alerted to our presence by the falling of his comrade. He tried to raise his weapon, but I responded with half a clip and he was down for the count.

I heard a loud ping behind me and turned in a hurry.

An instructor had apparently been trying to shoot me in the back with his rifle, but he had been shot down before he could pull the trigger. The red TTR covered his helmet, congealing over the visor.

The thunder died down. The action had only lasted ten seconds, and six men were on the ground.

I waved into the foliage to our right at Kara, silently thanking her for her timely save. I was lucky she was such a good shot.

I looked around for more targets and when I saw nothing, lowered my rifle.

"All targets neutralized." I said. "How did you miss that guy, Jacob?"

He shrugged. "He came out of nowhere. Maybe he was linking back up with them?"

I nodded. It didn't really matter.

"You guys ready to blow some stuff up?" Austin said as he came out the underbrush in front of us.

"You bet," I said as I walked over to give him a high five.

He had to reach up a little, considering I was about a foot taller than him.

Jacob walked over to Simon and started whispering, pointing at the woods from where the others had come from.

"So did you guys get it done?" I said as I backed up.

"Yeah, would I be here if we hadn't done it already? We also heard that they're going to move her somewhere else after tonight."

I stiffened.

"All right, everybody form up on me. You too, Kara!" Jacob said as he and Simon walked over to us.

Kara slipped and skid out of the tree she was hiding in and jogged over to us.

"Did I ever mention how much I hate rain?" She moaned as she joined us.

"Yeah, yeah, we got it. Rain plus Kara equals angry Kara," I said. The others laughed.

She rolled her eyes.

"Everyone knows the plan?" Jacob said as he reloaded the magazine on the side of his SMG.

We all nodded.

"Well, let's move out then. Simon just told me that they're moving her again at dawn, so that doesn't give us much time. The time is 2245 hours. Everybody that still has a watch, I want you to synch it to the time 0100 hours in three, two, one—| Mark."

There was a chorus of beeping all around as we set our watches. Gladly, those were one of the few things we were allowed to start with for this exercise.

"Lock and load, Eclipse, we're moving out!"

2 hours later—|

I looked down from a hill at the brightly lit base ahead of us. The front gate was directly fifty meters below us, and I could easily see instructors pacing back and forth behind the fences and the main gate. The barracks was away from the main gate, near the back of the base. And near the middle, on a hill overlooking everything was the command outpost, our objective. I glanced at the walls again. Surprisingly, the watch towers were completely empty.

"Hey Jacob," I said as I scanned the base with binoculars, "It's not like the instructors to leave so few guys guarding the perimeter. I think they might have a trap ready for us."

"Yeah, I think so too. We just have to hope that those explosives Simon and Austin set up will do their work," Jacob said as he waved

the others forward.

I looked at my watch. 0055.

"We got five minutes, you guys. We have to move."

Simon groaned. "We're working on it. You've been checking that stupid freaking watch every five minutes ever since we started walking. Would it kill you to just chill out and give it a break? We are going to get her back. Just do your job and quit worrying."

I could feel myself blushing again as everyone moved to their positions. Kara would be providing sniper support from our current position while Jacob and Simon would move down the hill to the right side of the base. I would be with Austin, on the left flank.

Austin looked down at his watch. Thirty seconds left.

Jacob ran to Kara, and then came over to us.

"You ready to make some noise?"

"You know it!" Austin replied.

I nodded my head and smiled.

Jacob ran back to Simon and went prone. The rain became an absolute torrent. The wind whistled through the trees as the outside and inside of the base became absolute mud. I could feel and hear my own heartbeat thumping in my chest, matching the shaking ground beneath us.

I looked at my watch. _Three, two, oneâ€|_

7. The Raid

****Author's Note:****

****One long chapter coming up. This is my first combat chapter, so please, critique me all you like. But please, no flames.****

****0100 Hours, July 10, 2549****

****Onyx, Unknown Location****

Andâ€| Nothing.

I glanced over at Austin, who was staring at the base with as much intensity that he could muster. After a few more seconds, still nothing happened. I sighed. Austin turned his head sharply to glare at me. I shrugged. He pulled something out of his pocket and muttered something under his breath in exasperation. With a flick, he armed the detonator in his left hand and held down the bright red button on top of the device.

A red fireball lit up the sky. The troops in the base began to yell and scream from both surprise and pain. I glanced back at Austin again as I got up to run. I could easily see his bright smile through the rain, pointing at me in particular as if to say "I told you so."

As I sprinted to the left of the front gate, I saw multiple instructors covered in red and lying motionless in the soft, muddy dirt around the barracks.

"I hope they like that TTR," I said as Austin and I reached side of the base.

He uncovered the tunnel we had spent hours on the previous day. Without it, the explosives would never have been set by Simon and Austin and the whole plan would have been doomed from the start. Water had begun to pool at the bottom of the tunnel from the intense rain. If I had to guess, the water was filling about a third of the passage.

"And I bet you thought it wouldn't work!" Austin said gleefully as he turned to the tunnel.

I nodded. "Of course. Remember the last time we left the explosives to you?"

Austin laughed as his voice began to echo off of the walls. "Why do you think I brought an extra detonator?"

Austin had found the TTR mines while scouting the base before we made our plans. We had dug them up and had carried them into the forest so he could reprogram them to work with a detonator. He was good with that type of stuff. Then, we put them back where they were before. That was what the team had been waiting for all night; the placement of the mines.

I could clearly hear gunfire reverberating through the tunnel now as we began to get near the exit.

I hope the others are doing OK I thought to myself as I crawled.

After another minute or so of suffocating darkness and water, we reached the other side.

Austin gave me a hand up and yanked me to ground level to a scene of absolute chaos. Instructors were swarming everywhere like ants coming out from a destroyed anthill. Warthogs were motoring past us to get to the main gate where Simon and Jacob were providing a distraction. Apparently my hunch was right. The instructors were baiting us to the base in order to win the exercise, but they obviously hadn't expected any surprises. Unfortunately for them, the TTR mines were a definite shock inducer.

I could barely see Simon and Jacob hiding in the trees just to the right of the base, their SMG and MA5B lighting up the entrance of the base. The heavy rain was definitely helping, as any shots they took were mostly covered by lightning, thunder, or the general mist surrounding the rain. All the same, instructors began surging from deeper inside of the base to the front gate, firing as they went.

As I watched, several of them fell with confused looks on their faces into the dirt, red TTR paint coating their helmets. I smirked to myself. Kara and her DMR were doing their job well. I gave a salute that I was sure she could see. I could easily picture her smiling deep in the forest, her rifle in her hands and her eye gazing through

the scope.

"C'mon Darren, we gotta move!" Austin yelled as he yanked me from the battle.

I shook my head, and we began to sprint further into the base. As we rounded a corner of a barracks, a whole squad of instructors sneered at us.

"Light 'em up boys!" One of them yelled with delight as the instructors opened fire. Automatic fire soon erupted around us, forcing Austin and I to run back around the far corner of the building again. Red peppered the corner and the ground next to it, making the mud an unnatural dark red as the paint seeped into it.

I leaned slowly to the left to look around the corner- only to quickly jump back as another stream of red flew by. I leaned and fired my rifle around the corner, blind firing and spraying randomly. Judging from the lack of surprised grunts or noises of pain from the other side, I had gotten no one.

We can't move! I thought in exasperation as a bullet grazed my arm, which I snapped back quickly. Luckily, the shot hadn't burst, as my arm would have been frozen if it did.

Then I remembered.

The grenades!

I hurriedly yanked one from my belt. Upon seeing the grenade, Austin smiled with glee. I couldn't help but smile too. This was going to give them a really bad hangover. Making sure the pin was yanked out, I chucked it around the corner.

"Flash bang out!" I yelled to Austin, and dove away from the corner.

There was a bright flash and noise followed by the screams of the instructors. I motioned Austin forward. He turned the corner and started rapidly firing with his BR-55 as he moved forward. After waiting one second, I followed him.

The sight of the dazed instructors thrashing around on the ground made me grin as I opened fire. One magazine for me and half of one magazine for Austin was all it took. The men fell into the mud and stayed there, dead for the remainder of the exercise.

I slammed in a new mag and pushed the bolt forward, locking it into place and making sure it was ready for the next encounter.

Judging from the diminishing sounds from the gate, I guessed that Jacob and Simon had drawn the Warthogs and quite a few instructors away. They wanted revenge after we had whooped them time and time again. Sadly for them, it was all part of our plan.

Hopefully, the Simon and Jacob wouldn't fall back straight to Kara, or else she was screwed. A DMR was mainly for long range, and was poor in close range combat, as Kara had unfortunately found out during our last exercise. She still had the marks on her shoulder from where the TTR has slammed into her at a high force.

Another group of instructors started to move toward the gate as we ran past them. We fired on them as we passed, spraying from the hip. There were five thumps as each body hit the ground.

We rushed over what used to be the kill zone in their ambush without any resistance. The mud gave way under our feet, squelching as we tried to force our way through. After some difficulty, we were finally within line-of-sight of the command post. None of the instructors seemed to be noticing us as we slowed down to pick our way through the base's buildings. Thanks to the rain, we were able to get within 20 meters of the building until finally one of the instructors guarding the dark grey command post up ahead saw us creeping through the murk. He yelled out a warning to his comrades and dashed inside the post, tripping over the mud.

All of the windows opened at once, almost blinding me and Austin with light. The windows seemed almost eerie, flashing out into the mist like a ghost ship on the high seas. I squinting, ducking and trying to see through the rain and the windows to see their defenses. Somehow audible over the rain, I heard Austin gasp as he too caught sight of what awaited us; behind each window was a deployable machine gun. The three long barrels on each gun began to spin up, preparing to deliver a powerful stream of firepower.

"Ohâ€|" I murmured as they all turned to face us. "Get down!"

I grabbed Austin and threw him and myself into a watery ditch just as every gun opened fire. Dirt exploded all around us. The TTR inside of the bullets began to coat the top of the ditch with red. I tossed another flash grenade out of the ditch and waited.

Bang!

I raised my head, and abruptly lowered it as another burst of gunfire flew by. The flash bang apparently hadn't worked. While I was sure some of the instructors had been stunned, not everyone had caught a piece of the blast. I sighed in frustration, angry about the whole predicament we were in.

I looked at Austin, who was hugging the dirt for dear life, and then looked back at the command post again. Having not seen us for a minute, the gunners' fire slowly drifted down to periodic shots to keep us suppressed and in the mud.

"Hey Austin, I think I can reach the post if you provide some suppressing fire."

Austin looked at me as if I was crazy.

"You gotta be kidding me."

"Does it look like I'm joking?" I asked as I reloaded my rifle and racked the chamber.

"Well, if you're serious, you need to be faster than Simon. Think you can do that?" I nodded.

Then he smiled.

"Godspeed then." He joked as he shifted to where he would be ready to fire as soon as he crouched up.

I crouched, ready to sprint.

"On my mark. Three, two, one—| Mark!"

I jumped out of the ditch as Austin started firing burst after burst from his BR. The only thing I heard from then on was the sound of my breathing, and my heart pumping in my chest. I felt the dirt erupt around me as the instructors began to open up and target me. I jumped from side to side, attempting to dodge as tracers lit up the air in front of and around me. They created a ghostly light in the rain, a dark and burning orange against a sea of blue.

I heard the sharp crack of Kara's DMR as she noticed my desperate charge. I saw more than one instructor fall backward limply as I ran. The air around me reverberating as the thunder once again rolled. The firing slacked off as I staggered from the sound. I fell to a knee, and with all of my strength, pushed off of the muddy ground, making a squelching noise as the moisture refused to let go of my boot. I reached one of the windows and ducked under the sill, priming my last flash bang. I chucked it into the window and covered my ears.

I felt the grenade's customary bang rebound off the metal in front of me. I jumped over the windowsill and into the building. The instructors inside the hallway within were all on the ground, moaning and clutching their faces. There were easily a dozen or so of them. I showed them no mercy.

I fired my rifle into the crowd at my feet until the moaning had stopped and silence had met my ears again. Well, as much silence as the rain allowed.

I looked out the window and waved. Austin quickly jumped up and ran over.

"That was nuts," he said as I lifted him inside of the window.

I nodded in agreement.

"Let's never do that again. Ever."

"Agreed."

We quickly charged up the corridor and further into the infrastructure of the building. The maze of corridors was at first confusing. We stopped after the first turn, already lost. Austin shrugged and motioned to a sign above us, and then to the door to our left.

RADIO ROOM

I shook my head. Not the right place. I pointed left. If there was any way to guess, she would be near the center of the outpost. Austin nodded in agreement and took point, slowly making his way down the hallways. We made sure, as Mendez always barked at us, to 'check our corners.' No more instructors bothered us though. I turned a right corner and tighten my grip on my rifle as it pointed at- nothing. I frowned. Something wasn't right.

At the end of the corridor I could see a door labeled _COMAND CENTER._ I nudged Austin on the shoulder and pointed to the sign. He smiled and nodded again. If anything, that was the most likely place she would be.

_I guess all of them were in that hallway. _I thought as we formed up on either side of the door. I gave Austin a countdown with my hand. Once my hand changed to a fist, he kicked the door in.

I rounded the corner.

The barrel of a M6G pistol met me, almost pointing right in between my eyes. Without even thinking, I slapped the gun up and away. It went off into the door, the round splattering it with red paint. I punched the instructor currently facing me in the stomach as hard as I could. He bent over in surprise as the air in his lungs escaped with a loud _oof_. I could hit pretty hard when I wanted too. I finished him off by bringing my elbow down onto the back of his neck. He folded over and hit the floor face first and didn't move again. I fired a round into his head with my rifle for good measure. Austin passed me and ran into the middle of the room, where a chair was set up.

Sitting in it was Hannah. She was strapped into the chair with zip ties and had a length of duct tape over her mouth. She looked a little banged up, with a few bruises visible on her face. Relief filled her eyes as we approached.

Three days ago, the instructors had gotten permission to take one of us to a random base in the jungle. They had chosen Hannah. When we had woken up the next morning, there had been a folder on her bed and a variety of weapons placed in our room. All that had been written on the paper inside the folder was: **Retrieve the Hostage.**

What had followed had been a dangerous game of cat and mouse. Every time the instructors felt we had been getting close, they had moved Hannah to an even more secure location. For almost two weeks, we had been hunting them, desperately trying to pinpoint their latest base of operations was. But, this time, we had finally beaten them before they could move her. I sighed in relief and pulled out my combat knife and cut her bindings.

"Thanks guys," she said as she was freed from the chair.

"Don't mention it," I said as I helped her up. "Just try not to get hit on the way out."

She smiled as I handed her the pistol I had just taken from the instructor. "Thanks, soldier," she laughed as she checked the ammo inside the magazine.

I blushed and turned back to Austin. He was trying not to smirk. I raised my fist to hit him, but thought better of it. He held in the smirk as best he could and checked the hallway again.

"Are we clear?"

"For now," he replied, still trying not to smile. "But we need to move soon. No telling how long before the rest of the instructors are

gonna be back from their wild goose chase after the others."

I nodded. I turned back to Hannah. She looked a little weak. "Can you run?"

"No," she admitted, looking down to her ankle. I looked and felt sick to my stomach. The ankle had been broken severely, leaving the foot to flap around uselessly, hurting Hannah even more. I was surprised that she could even stand without making so much as a sound. I winced.

"Hannah, we need to get that treated as soon as we're back at base. C'mon, lean on me. There's no way you'll get anywhere on that leg."

Austin behind me muttered, "Of course you'll carry herâ€|" under his breath.

I shot him a glare.

At first she seemed about to stubbornly refuse because of Austin being there, but she finally gave in. I put my arm around her and helped her limp back to the doorway.

I looked at my watch. 0115.

I motioned to Austin and slowly led the way down the corridor and out the front door of the command post. None of the instructors on the ground had moved from their previous places.

"Have a nice nap, punks," I heard Austin say as he gave a particularly hard kick to a fallen instructor. I turned a blind eye to it. Most of us loathed the instructors, as it seemed like they were trying to make our lives impossible most of the time.

A burst of light suddenly filled my vision, partially blinding me. I began to duck as I tried to get my bearings, but a crack and a burst of mud next to my feet told me kept me standing. Hannah moaned as I accidentally put pressure on her foot. I shifted my feet away in apology. I looked to the source and saw two spotlight towers manned by three instructors each. All around us were instructors with assault rifles leveled and ready to fire. I heard a loud voice over the base's PA system.

"Drop your weapons and put your hands in the air!"

Austin and Hannah turned to me questioningly.

I dropped my gun. "Just do what they say guys. Play along."

Austin scowled. He dropped his BR and Hannah dropped her pistol. Then, we all slowly walked forward, our hands still in the air.

Three of the instructors moved toward us to search us. One of them smacked me in the head with his rifle as he jogged forward. The entire side of my face burst into agony as I fell face forward into the muddy ground. The mud and water from the rain formed around me as I tried to get up.

"Darren!" I heard Hannah yell. Without anyone to support her, she fell to the ground moaning in pain from her broken ankle. Austin reached down to help her, but was kicked in the back for his trouble. He fell in a heap right next to me.

"Take that you worthless kids!" The instructor said as he got out a zip tie for my hands. I could tell who it was just by his voice alone. Instructor Gunnison had hated my guts from day one at boot, and it made perfect sense that his hate would continue now. He gave me another kick to the stomach. I sputtered and wheezed, trying to get my breath back. "I bet you thought you were pretty sneaky, getting your little girlfriend there so easily. Well, let me tell youâ€¦" He kicked again. "Nowâ€¦" Another kick. "You're." Another. "In." And yet another, to emphasize his final word. "Hell."

I could breath. He grabbed me out of the mud and gripped my arms. Austin and Hannah could only watch as the horrifying treatment continued. He smacked my head back into the ground, putting his full weight on top of me. I saw stars.

Just as he was about to zip tie me, another instructor who was marching forward stiffened, his eyes wide open in surprise, and fell on top of me, knocking Gunnison away. I turned my head and felt paint drip down from his head and onto my shoulder.

Chaos erupted. The instructors all opened fire on their sudden attackers and us. I felt a sharp sting and numbness in my arm as one round hit it dead on. I yelled out.

"Darren! Are you alright!?" Austin called out as the volume of fire picked up.

"I'm fine!" I replied gritting my teeth.

"The hell you're not!" I heard roar behind me. I turned to see Gunnison jump up just before he slammed into me again. He brought his fist up and brought it down. I twisted my head out the way and let his fist stick into the muck next to my face. I put my feet behind his back and pushed as hard as I could. The force flipped him over me and onto his ugly face. I staggered to my feet as he struggled in the mud, trying to get up again. I lashed out with my foot and caught him on the right side of his face. He spat out a tooth, cursing and muttering under his breath as I found my way behind him. I kicked out again, this time focusing on his stomach. He wheezed now, trying to catch his breath like I had. I showed no mercy. I kicked him again and again until he stopped moving. When I had finished, his breathing was very similar to a rasp. I could still hear the battle raging around me, but I was focused on this one man. I leaned in close.

"Now it's your turn to feel the pain, 'maggot'." I punched him right in the face. He crumpled into the mud, knocked out cold.

Then, I heard the loud rumbling of an engine. I turned my head away from the now motionless Gunnison and caught a glimpse of a Warthog charging the ranks of the instructors. The soldiers raced out of the way of the vehicle and fired again and again into its chassis. The jeep got a red paint job in less than a second.

It approached us and, just as it was about to run us over, fishtailed

into a stop, covering the three of us in mud.

There in the driver's seat was Simon, with Jacob in the back in the chain gun providing suppressing fire. Amazingly, they hadn't been hit.

"C'mon you guys!" Simon yelled.

"Heck yeah! Shotgun!" Austin yelled as he jumped into the passenger seat.

Hannah and I looked at each other and then at the full capacity jeep. I grabbed her from the ground and pulled her to the back of the Warthog. With help from Jacob, I slung her into the back. I leapt over the side and ducked under the one of the short walls on either side of the Hog.

"They're inside Simon! Let's go!" Jacob shouted as he let out a long burst from the chain gun.

Simon slammed down on the pedal and raced the Warthog through the instructors' reformed line. Once again, they jumped out of the way, desperately trying to not get crushed by the wheels. Simon laughed maniacally, honking the horn of the jeep as we hurtled towards the exit.

I kept my head down until we had exited through the entrance of the base, then looked back. Behind us was a group of very angry instructors were trying to chase us, firing as they went.

Mission accomplished I thought as the instructors faded into the heavy rain of the jungle. I sighed and glanced over at Hannah. She was watching me. She reached her hand over to where mine was and squeezed. I smiled. The rain washed over us as we sped into the dark night.

8. Graduation Day

****0420 Hours, February 19, 2551****

****UNSC **_**Hopeful**_**

I tapped my foot on the deck of the Pelican, making a sound similar to a drumbeat.

I was nervous. We were about to see whether any of our training over the last ten years would be worth anything. Augmentations were today.

Lieutenant Ambrose, our commanding officer, had offered us all a way out. He'd shown us what had happened to other Spartans. Said that many were horribly disfigured, or simply died outright. The transformation would be painful, even if we made it. He asked if anyone wanted to opt out.

No one raised his or her hand.

The Lieutenant had seemed very pleased with that.

There was no way that I, after so many years of training and preparation, could even think about backing out. And besides, I had volunteered for the program. That didn't make me any less nervous, though.

I looked around at the group that surrounded me. My team. My friends. My family.

Jacob caught my eye first, being the person sitting in front of me. He nodded and continued to stare straight ahead like he had been since we had taken off. Throughout our training, he had been a good leader and always seemed to have a grasp on almost any situation.

He looked exactly like he did when we had first seen each other except for a curved scar over his cheek from when an instructor had gotten too close in a close combat exercise with a knife. Needless to say, the instructor paid for it dearly.

Austin, in the corner of the drop ship, was humming quietly to himself. Whenever I saw him when not on a mission, he always had a mischievous grin on. He always seemed to be laughing about something or other, probably because of the shenanigans he and Simon got into. He had let his dark brown hair grow longer than regulation, to the point that it was almost in his eyes. Despite having all this time to grow, he was still the shortest out of all of us by about a foot or even more. He was by far the best with explosives out of the whole group, and a useful scout due to his size.

Hannah, the long brunette hair with red streaks in it, was by far the best medic in the class of 330 Spartans about to disembark. She could work magic with a bio foam canister, and was an expert at giving emergency first aid. At one point in training, she even helped me when I had broken a leg when I had jumped off of a tower in a desperate escape from instructors, and had eased the pain enough to allow me to walk, albeit with my arm around her shoulders and a very pronounced limp.

Just another reason I hate heights! And another reason why we had started dating. It had started shortly after I had broken my leg. She had come in, with tears streaming from her eyes and she saw me with my leg hoisted above me in a hard cast. Then, without warning, she had run forward and hugged me tight. Struggling for breath, I had asked her what was wrong. She pulled away, looking into my eyes with her deep blue eyes. Then, she had rushed me and pulled me into a hug.

"Promise you won't ever do that again," she had said, holding me in place.

I had promised her I wouldn't.

She was in her corner of the Pelican and was sitting with her head in her arms. For a second, I thought something was wrong, but then I noticed the pattern of her breathing. She was only asleep. I smiled.

Lucky.

Kara was picking at her nails, like she always did when she was nervous. Luckily, it never affected her aim. She was the third-best

shot on base. She was also our resident stealth expert, able to sneak up on any Spartan or instructor on base, except for Olivia from Saber Team, that is. That girl was an absolute ghost.

Unfortunately, she always seemed to rub her skills in everybody else's faces whenever she could, and she was extremely cocky. For someone whose job was to be a silent sniper, she could be quite the chatterbox in combat.

Simon sat near the back of the Pelican, right next to the ramp. He was staring at the ground, his jaw clenched. His black hair was cut in a short mohawk, with the wisp of a beard starting on his chin. He was easily our best pilot. Give him any flying machine, human, Covenant, even a 20th century Wilbur and Orville Wright airplane; he could fly it. I bet he was wishing he were flying this bucket at the moment. He didn't like it when other people flew us. We all felt the same way. There were way too many variables.

At one point in training when we were around nine, he had tricked us into following him to the base's hangar, where several of its Pelicans were stored. He had told us that he only wanted to have a look at the inside of one, but once he was in the cockpit, he was pressing buttons, closing the hatch, and preparing for liftoff. After a six-mile joyride, the instructors had caught us and had given us KP for a week. But, we didn't crash. So I guess that's a plus.

He had been unusually quiet since take off, without a joke or funny comment like he usually did before a mission.

Then again, there wasn't much to laugh about right now.

There were no windows in the Pelican, but I knew what I would see outside in the dark and vast emptiness ahead of us; a giant field hospital, named the Hopeful. It was the largest mobile medical base ever built by human hands, and it had accomplishments and legends that easily matched its size. And right now, it was our destination.

I looked around again, and gave another satisfied smile. We were ready.

My foot stopped tapping the floor.

"We're there candidates! Dropping the ramp in five!" our pilot said as he brought the craft to a soft landing.

The ramp opened to a view of a wide hangar, with Longswords and Pelicans everywhere. Technicians, medics, and engineers were running about, making preflight checks, wheeling wounded around, or refueling and repairing ships.

We filed out in an orderly row, with Jacob in front. We joined the rest of the group, who were marching single-file past The Lieutenant. As we passed by, I straightened and saluted him. So did the rest of the team.

Ambrose saluted back, watching proudly as we marched deeper into the ship.

We entered the medical wing, where the teams were separated from each

other and placed into separate rooms, each containing six pods lining the wall with tubes and vials full of liquid.

I gulped. This was it.

I waited for the ONI medical technician to leave the room, and then turned to my teammates. I cleared my throat.

"You guysâ€¦ In case I don't make it, I want you to knowâ€¦ It's been the greatest honor training with each of you."

The others smiled.

"Well, I'm glad it was great for you," Simon said with mock seriousness. "It was terrible for me."

We all started laughing.

"Yeah, you're not the one who was actually shot with a real bullet!" Austin said as he doubled over in laughter.

The others started laughing even harder. I tried not to blush. During a live fire exercise, I had accidentally shot Austin in the knee. Although he had fully recovered, he loved to bring it up whenever he could to make fun of me. But they always forgot that he was the one who ran in front of me.

"Okay guys, calm down. Darren brought up a good point," Jacob said turning sober and holding up his hands to motion for quiet. "It's been great working with you guys, and I would never trade any of you for anyone else on any other team."

"Likewise," Hannah said.

She put two fingers over her mouth, the Spartan version of a smile that we usually used in our SPI armor suits. We all repeated the motion as well.

The technician stepped back in.

"Alright, let's get started. Candidates, please go the pod with your number on it and lay down on the table inside of it. The augmentations will begin shortly," She said, as she checked off her clipboard.

I shook hands with each member of the team, offering luck and exchanging jokes as we all walked into our separate pods.

Luminescent white sterile lighting lighted up the inside of the pod, and it felt strangely blinding. I laid on the table, trying hard to ignore the two needles on either side of me that would, if I guessed correctly, would enter my brain through the temples to inject their chemicals. I shuddered. I hated needles so much.

A medical technician walked in with a needle in his hand and started feeling for a vein in my arm. He found one, and with a little pinch, pushed it deep into my skin. I winced.

"G128, I need you to count down from ten."

I nodded and started counting.

"Tenâ€| nineâ€| eightâ€|"

The technician pressed a button and the machine around me began to move, bringing needles to where they needed to be injected. The needles beside my head began to spin.

I took a deep breath, and kept counting. My heart began to beat a million kilometers an hour.

"Sevenâ€| S-sixâ€| F-fiveâ€|

My vision was turning blurry, the lights in the pod taking on an almost bloody quality.

I tried to finish the countdown, but could not. My world went black as the sound of the whirring needles drowned out my ears and the sharp needles all punctured me at the same time.

****Author's Note: ****

****I got the inspiration for the end of this chapter from one of the live action trailers for Halo: Reach where Carter is being transformed into a Spartan. If you are confused, please watch that trailer, it will probably help. Plus, the trailer is just awesome, except for the needles. Yikes!****

****I would also strongly urge you guys to review. You have no idea how much of a boost it gives me when someone comments on my story. It will inspire me to write faster, which means more chapters for you, the reader! Thank you!****

****Until next time, R&R!****

9. Spartan

****2200 Hours, February 20, 2551****

****UNSC **_**Hopeful**_**

I woke with a start. I tried to thrash around, but was stopped by a metal clamp that was holding my arms and feet down. I started to freak out, confused by my surroundings, but then I remembered. The _Hopeful_. The augmentations. The needles.

I shuddered and sighed.

My dreams had been terrible, as usual. It was always the same one: the Covenant, my world burning, and my family dying in front of me. I felt a chill run down my spine.

It's in the past Darren, I thought as I tried to move again and dispel that chill.

I gave an experimental push on the clamp on my right arm. It bent with a loud creak. I pulled back in shock. I could only imagine what my face looked like as I surveyed the damage.

The clamp, which had been a straight line, was now bent in a twenty-degree angle.

Holyâ€¦ I thought as I stared at the dent.

A nurse walked with a tray and placed it on a table. She turned to me and smiled as she realized I was awake.

"Hello, candidate, how are you feeling this evening?"

That was a good question. On one hand, my temples were burning, as though two drills had just been forced through them. In a way, I guess that was true. I had a headache. My arms felt like they were burning slightly, and my legs felt about the same. My head was throbbing, and my insides felt like they had been taken away, turned inside out and then placed back in my body. Butâ€¦

I felt more _powerful _somehow. My muscles actually felt larger and my vision was easily ten times better than it had been. I squinted. I could easily make out each individual bolt in the ceiling and the marks left by the welding of the ceiling from easily sixty years before.

"Very, very sore."

She smiled. "Yes, that is to be expected. Luckily, I'm here to give you some pain meds and-" her eyes widened. "No, wait!"

Too late.

Forgetting about the restraints, I moved to slide my feet off the table and onto the cold floor.

The metal groaned, and with a grating wrenching noise, pulled free of the ceiling. My ankles burned as I pressed against them. The clamps that had been holding me fell to the ground with a loud bang. I followed fell face down on the ground with a loud smack on the metal.

I heard the nurse give a startled shout and run out of the room, probably to get another doctor. My head rang as I slowly sat up again, leaning against the table. I held my hand up to my face and moved it.

It moved in almost slow motion. I accidentally whacked the remains of one of the clamps. A dull ache spread through my arm, but I felt no serious pain. My ankles, which had been hurting from the clamps, felt even duller than the arm. I smiled with giddiness. I waved my hand as fast as possible, but it still looked like it was moving through water. I gripped the restraints holding my other hand and ripped them off like they were paper. My grin grew. I began to free myself from the other clamps.

Once free, I leapt up from the ground and onto my feet. I wobbled, trying to get my balance, and, failing, quickly tasted the floor again. I moaned in annoyance.

Another doctor walked in, this time a relatively young man.

"I wouldn't be doing that yet."

I nodded, and with a lot of great effort and precision, sat on the bed. In hindsight, I actually more flopped back onto it.

The doctor started grabbing vials from the tray that the nurse had brought in and put their contents in syringes. He looked at the clamps on the floor, raised his eyebrows at me, and turned back to his work. I blushed.

"You won't have a lot of coordination for a while. Your body is just trying to get used to its new strength and bone structure. We'll be giving you therapy exercises to work on while you recover," he said as he walked over to me from the tray.

"How long will that take?" I asked, my body finally lying firmly back on the table.

"It depends. You can't rush it, or you'll hurt yourself by going too far. It's mainly up to the body to recover from the changes we've made to it. But, if I had to guess, maybe around three months," he said as he squirted out some of the syringe to get rid of the air inside of it and pressed it into my arm. I shuddered as I felt the metal break through the skin and injected its contents.

I frowned. Three months would be a long time to simply sit and do nothing.

"Understood."

The doctor nodded. "Very good. I need to go check on the rest of your team, and then I will be back to make sure the pain meds are working. Is there anything that I can have a nurse grab for you?"

"Water," I said, realizing that my throat was extremely dry.

He nodded. "I'll be back later."

The doctor started to leave, then turned around.

"Oh, also, your commanding officer apparently wants to see all of the candidates as soon as they are all awake. So, I think you might actually want to get your balance down pretty quick."

He left, leaving me with my thoughts.

I grabbed a mirror off of a white counter next to me and looked in. I looked like an athlete in his early twenties, or late teens. The augmentations had changed my body from a kid to a young adult in less than 24 hours. But the one thing that instantly caught my attention wasn't the muscles and my new apparent maturity as a young adult. No, what caught my attention was my hair.

Usually a jet black, my hair color had changed. Instead, it was

"White?" I whispered under my breath in shock.

My hair had turned pure white in less than a day. I stared at it, my green eyes like lasers in the mirror, concentrating on my hair. I

glanced away, and then back again. It was still there, a bit overregulation, and still white. I shuddered. After the procedures, how could I know other things hadn't changed? I glanced all over myself with the mirror frantically. Nothing. Just the hair on my head was different. I sighed I defeat. More questions for the doctors later.

I experimentally shoved one of the clamps on the floor with my foot. It skidded incredibly fast a good three meters before it slammed into the wall on the other side of the room with a loud clang.

These new abilities could change everything. We could break through solid titanium. We could move faster. We could even potentially kill someone with one blow. I tightened my hand into a fist. There was no doubt, I _could _kill with one fist. That is, as long as I got my balance downâ€|

6 hours laterâ€|

Jacob walked in.

"C'mon, are you dressed yet?"

I threw my hospital gown at him as I grabbed my shirt.

He sidestepped it easily, laughing.

"You don't have to watch me, 'Mom'. I know how to get dressed," I said as I started to button up my pure white dress uniform.

"Really? You can do that? That's incredible! Then hurry up. We need to be down there by 0430 and you're gonna make Eclipse late."

I brushed some dust off of my uniform and turned back to him.

"Alright. Done. All clean, presentable, and even with matching clothes. You happy now?"

"Actually, yeah, I am," he said as he led the way into the hallway.

I followed him until we finally entered the room I had last seen my teammates in.

Hannah was nearby the doorway. On seeing me, she rushed over to me, significantly faster than ever before, and nearly tackled as she threw a hug around me.

"Are you alright?" she said, clutching onto me. I returned the hug and we parted.

"I'm feel fantastic. Better than that even. What about you?"

"Just some lingering pain," she said. "The doctors said there was nothing to worry about."

I nodded. "We did it, then," I said as I turned to the others.

I saw Austin in the corner, quietly talking with Hannah. Simon and

Kara were standing at the doorway, talking as well and waiting for us.

"We allâ€¦ whoa, wait, Darren, why is your hair all, umâ€¦" Simon stammered as he was the only person on the team who hadn't seen the change yet.

"White," I said as we walked up. "That's what your thinking, isn't it?"

"Yeah. What the hell happened to you?" He asked as we all walked out of the room and back to the hangar, Hannah and I holding hands. I couldn't help but admire the fluid way we all walked now compared to before the augmentations.

"Docs can't explain why fully. Their best guess would be through my body's reaction to the stress of the augmentations mixed with the chemicals that were induced into our bloodstream. Why no one else has this issue is anyone's guess."

"I like it though. I don't think I'll change it."

"That's great Darren, I'm so happy for you and your self confidence," Kara said.

All of us except for me chuckled as we fell in line behind the other candidates. I finally let go of Hannah's hand. I looked around. There was Nova, Archer, Orionâ€¦ The group looked the same as before, with no one missing. _Did we all make it?_ I asked myself as the buzz of conversation filled the room.

We waited another ten minutes, then Lieutenant Ambrose walked on a platform above all of us. The group fell silent as all eyes fell on the giant above us. Ambrose was by far the most legendary of all the instructors. He was fair, yet harsh when he needed to be. Throughout training, we had eventually learned that he and Mendez genuinely cared for us and wanted us to succeed. Yet Mendez was still the muscle, while Ambrose was the brain.

Mendez, on the step below Ambrose, barked, "Aten- hut!"

We all straightened and saluted. Ambrose returned our salute and then said "At ease."

I put my hands behind my back and put my feet at shoulder width.

"Spartans."

The word echoed off of the walls of the hangar. I realized with a start that the entire hangar was empty except for us. Ambrose's voice echoed across the empty space.

"Yes, you heard me. Spartans. Every one of you has overcome great challenges. You will overcome still many more. Each of you has demonstrated the qualities of a Spartan throughout these difficulties by overcoming them against all odds. Because that is what Spartans do. We fight as hard as we can, no matter the opposition. We prevail no matter the situation. We realize, above all else, that the mission comes first. Because you have come to know this during your years of

training, I would like to be the first to congratulate you. And I have no doubt that you will honor the name of Spartan to your last breath. Well done. You are now Spartans!"

The triumphant cheers of 330 Spartans filled the hangar as Ambrose finished his speech.

But, despite the celebration around me, I felt a little sad. I could never go back. Admittedly, I had actually volunteered for this. But, now that the augmentations had finally finished, I realized that a major turning point was now behind us.

I had just left my old body behind. No one could ever call me- or any of us- normal again. I would always stand out, maybe not in size, but in the way I moved and in the way I looked. I was different, literally to my bones and DNA. I wasn't human anymore. I was now a legend. A myth. A Spartan.

****Author's Note:****

****Thank you those who are reviewing! You make all this writing worth it!****

****Until next time, R&R!****

10. War Games

****0800 Hours, August 20, 2552****

****UNSC Frigate **_**Inclement Weather**_**

I donned my SPI armor as the ships PA system blared.

"Spartan teams Nova and Eclipse, please proceed to B deck for scheduled War Games exercise at 0830."

"I know, I know," I muttered, sliding on the light green, bulbous suit's gloves.

I hated this armor. It looked terrible, felt clunky, and was next to impossible to fix in the field. Yeah, it could turn partially invisible. Big whoop. It still felt like second-rate tissue paper compared to the real armor other Spartans were able to use. Luckily, that could possibly change after today.

The winner of today's War Games exercise would be able to receive the pick of the litter for new equipment and armor. And boy, did we need the upgrades. Bad.

With my helmet in hand, I stepped into an elevator on E deck and sped on my way to B deck.

Nova team was pretty good. We were neck and neck in the rankings of our class. That is, not including Saber, Gladius, and Katana. They had been left on Onyx to compete for "top honors."

I huffed at the thought of it. We could've easily taken them.

Nova's leader, Josh, was amicable to us usually, but he was downright

fierce in a firefight. He was not a faster thinker than Jacob, but he did well enough to lead a team. He could be cocky though, which affected his reactionary decisions and made him easily bait-able into traps. We would definitely use that to our advantage today.

I entered the dark armory. The harsh white lights lit up in response to my presence as I stepped inside. No one was here. Either the others hadn't been here yet, or they had already left me behind. Judging from a few empty racks of equipment, the latter was probably true. I placed my puke green and yellow helmet on one of the benches and walked over to the wall of weapons in front of me.

I grabbed an MA5C off of a nearby rack and hefted its weight. Its reassuring firepower had gotten me out of quite a few jams in training, and I knew that I could always count on it. I grabbed six magazines for it and placed them in the webbing I had placed on my armor. I wouldn't need too much firepower. Fights between Spartans were always quick and ferocious. And besides, I had to stay light on my feet.

I reached down onto the table in front of me and grabbed an M6G pistol, testing the weight and spinning it in the air before placing it on the magnetic strips on my right side. Although not as powerful or as accurate as the M6D, the M6G was good for close quarters. Its compact form was perfect for room-to-room searches. And, as we would be inside an obstacle-ridden room for the duration of the match, it was perfect. I grabbed a dozen clips for it and shoved them into the pouches on my waist.

We were using TTR again, which worked much better with the suits on, as it could lock up the sections of the armor that were hit easily. The red seemed almost like neon on the bright green, somewhat reminiscent of the Old Earth tradition of Christmas. It was a pain to clean off the armor, but there was a simple way to stop getting paint on it: not getting shot.

I grabbed my helmet from the table I had left it on and placed it on my head. The HUD did not light up though, and would not light up until we were in the arena. I could almost imagine the sick yellow of the visor jutting out from the helmet.

I sealed the helmet into place and exited the armory through the other side, at our entrance to the arena. The rest of Eclipse was there already, fastening gear to their armor and listening to Jacob as he gave out instructions.

"Simon, you will have the left with the SAW. If you see anything, light it up. But don't forget, you're the bait. We need them to come to you for the ambush to work, so don't scare them off."

Simon nodded, racking the bolt of his SAW and raising two fingers to his visor in a smile. He was able to hold the automatic weapon with only one hand. Unlike the regular rifle, Simon had attached a bipod and a small holographic sight in place of the normal iron sights. The normal round cylinder magazine had instead been replaced by a box magazine that could easily hold two hundred rounds at once.

"Glad to oblige, sir. But, I gotta ask, why am I always the bait?"

"I've told you a million times, its because your more noticeable than the rest of us. Your height makes you a very appealing target."

"Just once, though, why can't the short one be the target?"

"Hey!" Austin shouted, turning from his BR.

"Just kidding buddy," Simon chuckled as he set the SAW on the ground.

"Glad you could join us, Darren," Kara said as she placed four 14.5x114 millimeter rounds into her SRS Anti-Material Rifle magazine.

"Yeah, what is it with you and being late all the time?" Hannah said while fiddling with her helmet.

"I love to always be fashionably late," I said as I sat down on one of the crates near the door.

"I'm happy as long as you made it to the party. Did you catch that?" Jacob said.

"Yeah. Simon gets shot and we spring a trap. Where am I going to go?"

"You're gonna be with me. Our goal is to flank them by going through their spawn. Kara will provide long-range fire support, while Austin and Hannah try to perform a pincer move around the front of Simon's position. With luck, we should have them surrounded on all sides."

I nodded. A solid plan. Exceptâ€¦

"What if they don't go for the bait?" I asked.

Jacob turned to me as he placed his helmet on his head. I was still able to see his face, since the visor was not polarized.

"We'll adapt."

The PA system blared again, this time the ship's AI _Athena_ speaking with her aloof sounding voice.

"Spartans, are you ready?"

"Yes ma'am," Jacob replied.

"Very good. Lowering the entrance in five. Prepare."

I racked the chamber on my assault rifle and stood next to Jacob, whose visor had now polarized. Simon stood in front of us as he gripped his MG, staring into the wall that would open into the arena. Behind us was Kara, sniper rifle raised in case she could get a good cross-map shot on Nova. Austin and Hannah readied their rifle and SMG, respectively, and got moved to either side of Simon.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Boop!

My HUD lit up, showing my motion tracker and ammo count in the top

right corner of my visor.

The doors opened and we sprinted forward. I heard Kara firing round after round past us as we ran to our respective positions. I was barely even breathing hard as I sprinted forward. In less than seven seconds, Jacob and I had already crossed half of the room. We both slid into a short wall and planted our feet, peering over the edge of the cover. I lifted my rifle, half expecting Josh and his team to be right around the corner.

The arena was pretty large considering it was inside a starship. The lights were dim, which would have been a challenge if regular marines were using it. For us, with our enhanced night vision, it posed no problem.

The whole place had tall cargo containers with barrels placed here and there. Steel girders lined the floor, and twisted metal and burnt metal was everywhere. Some metal barriers were also placed at intervals, such as the place we were hiding behind right now.

I heard Jacob over the comm whisper, "Hey Simon, do you see 'em yet?"

"Not yet sir. Kara has confirmed that one of her shots connected, and one of their players is out already. I repeat, one of Nova is down.

"That's good news. Darren and I are about to move into their spawn, so if any are hiding there, we'll find them."

You know you don't need to whisper into the comm right? This is a secure- holy-!"

I heard a long burst of SAW fire come from our left, the high pitched chatter followed by the percussion of small arms fire, then silence.

"What was that!?" I yelled into the comm. "Simon?"

There was a burst of static, then someone answered.

"Don't worry guys, I'm fine. Austin and Hannah drove them back. But they got me pretty bad. My foot was sticking out of cover and they hit it. They also got my arm, so I can't reload at all."

"Just stay there, we're flanking around them to assist! C'mon Darren!"

We vaulted over our cover and ran the rest of the distance to Nova's base. Just as we entered a corridor leading into their base, I heard Kara yell, "Darren! Jacob! Get down!"

I immediately ducked and fell flat on my face, hugging the ground. Jacob wasn't so lucky. As he fell flat, I saw a burst of red flash over his helmet. He hit the ground like a rag doll and didn't move.

"Jacob!" I shouted, rolling into cover. Good thing too, because as soon as I had finished my roll behind a nearby barrel, everything broke loose. Red covered the ground around me as Nova's TTR rounds

lit up the area I had just been in.

I fired a few bursts from cover, but I knew there was no way to hit anything accurately. The magazine emptied and I reloaded, sliding another magazine in and snapping the bolt forward. I opened fire again. In the background, I could hear Kara and her rifle doing their brutal and precise work. Slowly but surely, Nova's firing slackened and then ended entirely.

I took a deep breath and reloaded again. Since Jacob was down, I guess that left me in charge. I keyed the comm.

"Guys, I'm pinned down at Nova's base. Stupid campers. They've got everything around it zeroed in. Eclipse leader is down! I repeat, Jacob is hit!"

There was a pause, then someone responded.

"Copy that," I heard Hannah say as I fired off another sustained burst. "We'll provide suppressing fire so you can bug out. Wait until we're in position, then we'll go on your mark."

"Alright, but make it fast! I think they're trying to flank around my left. Kara, keep that from happening!"

"You got it," she said coolly. I could almost picture her sighting down her scope, calm and collected.

The boom from her rifle's shots echoed around the room as she opened fire.

"Another one down," she said as I fired another burst and started to reload.

"Nice job, Kara. MVP of the game right there."

I heard her laugh through my mike.

"You know it."

"Alright, Darren, we're in position," Austin said, his voice sounding anxious over the comm.

"Alright, on my mark!" I tensed. "MARK!"

I leapt from cover as the others opened fire. I could feel bullets from Nova's base splattering the floor next to my feet as I wove back and forth across the corridor. I raised my rifle behind me, and, without looking, hosed the corridor. Finally, I was out.

"Thanks guys," I gasped, putting my hands on my knees as I caught my breath.

"Don't mention it," Hannah said as she reloaded her SMG. "What's the plan now?"

I thought for a moment and then, it hit me.

"Hey Simon."

"What?" he said, limping over to the others and me.

"Remember what you said earlier? I think you're gonna get your wish. Austin, I need you to be our rabbit. They'll have less of a chance to hit you than one of us. You're going to run up the corridor, right into the kill zone. Use cover as you go, but remember, you need to keep their attention on you. How you do that depends on your creativity."

"Kara, you need to make sure he doesn't get flanked. Simon, since you're 'hit,' I need you to provide suppressing fire from back here. Hannah, you and I will go around the left. Any questions?"

"Hey Hannah, can I take your SMG? It's lighter than the rifle," Austin said as he stretched in place.

"Sure," she said, swapping with him.

"On go then. Three, two, one—Go!" I shouted as I turned around the side of our cover and sprinted across the open area to the left of Nova's base. I heard the thuds of Hannah's footsteps close behind me, as well as a long burst of MG fire from where we had just come from. The sound of rifle fire became an intolerable barrage of noise in my helmets audio systems, so I turned it down.

"Darren, there's a low wall over there that leads into the base. We can use it to flank Nova!" Hannah yelled, taking the lead. I followed her to the said gap and vaulted it after her. I raised my rifle.

"No contact," I said, keeping my eyes peeled for any movement. "Let's move."

The sound of gunfire grew even more as we approached the part of the base that Nova occupied.

"Austin, are you alright?" I asked as we finally reached the square where Nova was hiding.

"Yeah! They got me pinned behind a barrel on the left side of the corridor. I saw where they were. One's on the top left, another is under a table across from me, and another, I think it's Josh, is behind a yellow box on the right. I have no idea where the other one is!"

"Don't worry," I said, pulling out my magnum. "I do."

I lined up the sights, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet only had to travel two feet before it reached the back of my target's head. There was a spray of red, then the other Spartan fell to his knees and slumped to the ground.

He had been patrolling around here to watch for us. Fortunately, he had been facing the wrong way.

I holstered my pistol again and pulled my rifle back over my shoulder.

"Hannah, who do you want?"

"I'll take the guy on the top right with the DMR."

"Right. I'll get Josh," I said, lining up my sights with his crouching figure.

"Open fire!" I roared, pulling the trigger. Josh fell forward as if he was in shock, with a dozen TTR rounds covering his chest. I also heard the crack of the DMR from the left stop completely. Hannah had gotten her man. I reloaded.

Now, it was time to end this.

"Eclipse, move up now!" I yelled, suppressing the girl Spartan under the table.

The end was actually kind of pathetic. The poor girl, being outflanked and outgunned, had no chance. She was "dead" within five seconds. The lights turned on all the way, and my HUD turned off. My assault rifle's compass and ammo count turned off as well. It was now a "dead" weapon, unable to fire any rounds.

"Game over," I heard Athena say over the ship's intercom. "Eclipse team wins. Unlocking armors now."

I pulled out the magazine in my rifle. It had been my last clip. I looked inside it. Three rounds left.

Each Spartan that had been hit got to their feet, and began walking around. Josh walked over to me.

"You guys are such campers," I said, taking off my helmet.

"Yeah, well, with your sniper covering us, we didn't have much of a choice."

"I know. She's quite the dead shot. Did she really nail one of you guys at the start?"

"Yep, Asad over there, our sniper," he said, pointing back toward their entrance to the arena. A Spartan was arguing with the girl we had shot earlier. He looked pretty mad as he pointed at us and waved his arms over his head.

"That must have been one hell of a shot."

"It was." He held out his hand. I took it and shook.

"Well played. It looks like you guys have first dibs to the new equipment coming in. Don't hurt yourselves."

"We won't," I said.

He turned away and walked back to his team.

I turned to the others and smiled.

"You heard him guys. Let's go see our new prizes."

****Author's Note:****

****Extra long chapter! Whoo, this one was a doozy, but I think it came**

out pretty good. And so the team progresses. I decided to include War Games into this because I believe that, even though the ****_**Infinity**_**** had the first ****_**simulated**_**** War Games, they were still around before it. For example, in Ghost's of Onyx, when Katana, Saber, and Gladius teams duel it out. Thank you so much to those who have reviewed so far, it's because of you that this is such a long chapter. They inspire me to write my best.**

****Till next time, R&R!****

11. New Toys and New Bruises

****1000 Hours, August 20, 2552****

****UNSC Frigate **_**Inclement Weather**_**

We all entered the armory one by one. The lights turned on at full power, lighting up the whole space. In the center of the room, there was a long table that went from our side of the room to the door on the other side of the room. On it was an assortment of neutral grey armor, in different shapes and sizes.

I grinned. I would never have to wear that SPI armor again.

A technician walked in and stood by the table. We put up our weapons and then lined up by the weapons rack on the wall opposite.

"Welcome Spartans. It appears that you came in first in the rankings, so you will be the first to try these new armor pieces. There are a few improvements over your present armor that I need to cover, as well as some safety and maintenance tips that will be essential in the field."

The tech cleared his throat and continued.

"The first improvement is by far the largest and the most helpful. This new armor has shielding capabilities."

Jacob whistled.

"That's quite the upgrade sir. I didn't know we were worth the extra credits."

"We've been able to reproduce the shielding on this new armor with cheaper equipment. Because of this, though, the suits have a weaker shield available. These are not Spartan II suits. They're just equipment we've been able to convert from various branches in the military into armor compatible with the Mark V/B variants of the original Mark V armor."

"Typical," Kara muttered, scowling. "Cheap soldiers, cheap equipment."

"I heard that," Simon assented.

The tech continued, nonplussed.

"Other improvements are in movement and reaction times. The armor will amplify how fast you move and will speed up how fast you react

to situations. You will be able to reach speeds of over fifty-five kilometers per hour, give or take, depending on your specific abilities. You may be able to even dodge bullets. Don't let it go to your heads, though. You're still very much killable, and the armor can only protect you for so long against plasma."

"Now that we have that out of the way, let's get to the maintenance and safety tips."

I internally groaned as he launched into a long lecture about the build-up of grime on our suits and how to stop the overload of the mini-reactor inside. While it was interesting to know that particular detail, my eyes began to wander to the shiny pieces of armor. They were only in bits and pieces, disassembled for the sake of convenience when trying them on. Even the visors had been yanked out of the helmets, four colors for each permutation.

"Now that safety is out of the way, feel free to find your own pieces of armor. Show them to me, and I'll be able to give you some details about what their purpose is in the field."

We rapidly spread out across the table.

"Hey Darren, get a load of this. There's no way anyone would want to wear this," Hannah said, lifting up a helmet that looked like a box. It had no visor.

"Sexy. Looks like a fish tank with no glass," I said, turning back to the technician. "What helmet is that?"

"Ah, yes, that is the GUNGNIR. It's especially helpful in moving combat scenarios. Note the camera on the front. Instead of using a visor like the rest, it covers the face. All of your visual information will come through that camera. Also, it--"

Hannah cut him off. "Yeah, that's cool and all, but it looks completely useless and possibly dangerous. Got anything more stream lined? I don't feel like having a box jutting out of my head that could get shot at any second."

The tech nodded and pointed to the far right table. "Over there. We have some that are less bulky, and potentially more 'useful'."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

I was having a hard time finding armor. The Commando armor seemed good, but it seemed more fancy than what I wanted. Plus, I am not a 'commando'. I sucked at being sneaky. I'd rather find something that was able to hold well under fire and be useful when trying not to be spotted. Another one that seemed good was the ODST helmet. But, I definitely wanted to be set apart from them.

Finally, the tech seemed to notice my indecision and walked over with a helmet in his hand. It had large, rounded features, with a rise along the top of it with two black triangles pointing out the front on each side of the rise. It had a thin visor and an area of black alloy beneath it that covered the nose, surrounded by armor. The

helmet was largely angular with a pair of what looked like breathers on each side of the mouth.

"You may want to take a look at this helmet. It's called Recon. It has better stealth capabilities and reduces your signature. It will stop you from being spotted as easily, and has increased zoom optics for long-range shots. It also comes with some attachments, such as a command network module or a UA/HUL."

While I did self-admittedly suck at stealth, there was something alluring in the design of the helmet. It looked sleek and durable at the same time, which was a definite plus in my book. The visor in particular is what caught my eye. While empty right now, I could easily picture a gold visor in an upside down V.

"I want the one with the CNM."

"Alright," he said, marking the clipboard behind him. "What chest plate?"

I looked, and found one with webbing and extra pouches for ammo and supplies. It was never a bad idea to have too much ammo. Plus, with my enhanced strength and the armor itself, I could definitely handle a surplus of ammo.

"That one." I pointed.

"Ah, yes, that one is Recon as well. And the shoulders?"

I squinted at the far end of the table, where Kara was picking through armor. She seemed very interested in the shoulders with dummy sniper rifle bullets on it. "The ones with ammo on the shoulders, the one that she is looking at."

"Those are sniper rounds, as I'm sure you know. Do you want something else placed or mounted on them?"

"Yeahâ€¦" I thought for a moment. "How about we leave them bare for now? I might have a few ideas for later."

"Ok, that's fine. How about a utility?"

"The tactical hard case caught my eye earlier. Definitely seemed sturdy. How about that?"

"That's good. It'll help you carry sensitive equipment, I guess?"

I shrugged. "Maybe I just want to keep my snacks safe?"

He smiled.

"Do you want anything on your wrist?"

"The GPS," I answered quickly. I always got lost on missions. It would be incredibly helpful to have my own map, instead of asking the others all the time. Plus separation could happen at any moment on a mission.

"What color?" The tech asked.

I smiled, already prepared.

"Black as the primary, and red as the secondary. And I don't mean the grey that they say passes for black. I mean _black_. Spec-ops colored, you know?"

The technician nodded, and made another mark.

"Visor?"

"Gold."

Another mark.

"Very well, your armor will be completed in two hours. You can continue to customize it when you receive it, but please, no unnecessary damage. One Spartan carved a skull into his EVA helmet. Can you believe that? Why would someone spend that much time just ruining a perfectly good helmet?"

I cleared my throat, ready to get out of the armory.

"Sorry, I'm rambling. You're free to go."

I waved to the others and walked out into the hallway and back to my room.

Two hours, huh?

I could easily find something to do during that time. I undressed in my room and threw the SPI armor across it to my bed. No more need for that armor any more. I changed into some grey fatigues and left to go lift some weights.

When I got to the weight room, I first went to the bench and put 300 kilos on. I began to press the bar up.

Oneâ€|

Another Spartan walked in. It was Asad, from Nova. He glanced at me and quickly looked away, and then continued over to the throwing weights.

Twoâ€| threeâ€| fourâ€| fiveâ€|

All of a sudden, I felt as if something was moving towards me. With lightning reflexes, I threw the bar up and flipped over to the left. I felt a whiff of air, followed by a loud clang as whatever it was hit the far wall. The bar fell and slammed into the bench, leaving a sizable dent in the metal and rubber. I glanced at the object I had dodged. It was a large, metal, hundred-kilo ball. I looked where it had come from.

Asad was busy grabbing another ball off of the rack, this time a hundred and ten kilo ball.

"What is wrong with you, man!?" I yelled, jumping out of the way as his next throw whizzed by me. "What are you trying to do!?"

"You Eclipses think you're so much better than us. Trying to make everyone believe that you are the best, that you are the fastest, that you are the strongest! But I know the truth. You are only weak and spineless show-offs who only know how to spawn kill and make fun of other teams. That armor should belong to us. We need it more than you ever will!"

"What in the world? Is that what this is about?" I gaped at him in shock as he gripped another ball. He was going down the line of weights, throwing heavier and heavier weights. "It was only a game! Let it go!"

I stepped forward, trying to reach him.

Whoosh!

Another ball flew by, barely missing me as I dodged. The weight dented the metal wall behind me with a loud clang, leaving yet another circular dent in the bulkhead.

"Plus, we beat you fair and square! And your team was camping, so I wouldn't complain abou-!"

Oof!

The next throw connected. One hundred and thirty kilos smacked into me at full force. I felt a few ribs crack as I fell to the ground, wheezing for air. I nearly blacked out. When I could finally see, Asad was on top of me, about to bring his fist down onto my face, when a hand reached out and grabbed it.

Asad turned in surprise and brought his other hand around to punch his assailant, only to receive a fist to the face for his trouble. He fell like a ragdoll onto me and didn't move again.

I pushed him off of me, coughing blood up as I did. I glared at him as I struggled to get up. I fell to my knees instantly. A hand reached down and picked me up. I finally could see my savior: Josh.

"Sorry about that. I tried to stop him, but when he saw you walking by our quarters, he snapped. He's just a sore loser."

"You don't say," I wheezed as I found my footing. "I think it was a bit more than that."

Josh shrugged.

"C'mon, we need to get you to the medical bay. I saw the ball hit you. It looked like a nasty hit."

Josh picked up the limp Asad and we began to walk to the elevators.

"It felt like a nasty hit," I said as we entered the elevator on our deck.

"Man, I'm so sorry this happened. I just wanna let you know, the rest of us don't feel like Asad here. We all agree, you deserve the win. Though, spawn killing isn't cool."

"Neither is camping."

He laughed. "TouchÃ©."

We reached the medical deck and entered the bay. As soon as we entered, a doctor noticed us and ran forward.

"What happened?" she said, gaping the unconscious Spartan in Josh's arms and me.

I probably looked like a mess, with blood going down my chin and shirt and rust from the ball on my shirt. I could already feel the bruise forming where the weight had struck.

"A little accident in the weight room," Josh said as he laid Asad down on the table.

"An accident!? What were you doing up there?" she asked me.

I froze for a second. Would I tell her about Asad and what he did? Or would I just let it go? Josh looked down at Asad, and then pointedly at me. I sighed.

"Just throwing some of the weights around, ma'am. Wasn't paying attention and took one to the chest. Josh hit Asad here as he ran toward me and I guess he whacked his head against something."

I looked at Josh, who grimaced at the stupidity of the story. I half-shrugged in apology, but stopped there. The pain in my chest kept me from moving around too much.

"Well, whatever happened, it wasn't serious," she said as she examined Asad. "He may have a light concussion, but other than that, he's fine. Now, let's see you."

I hopped onto the bed, wincing as I moved.

The doctor raised her scanner and slowly moved it over my chest, checking my bones through the x-ray function on it.

"It looks pretty good, considering how bad it could have been. You have two cracked ribs and a little bit of bruising on a few others. You need to rest for a couple of weeks in order for it to heal, so War Games are a definite no. And no combat for a while as well. Who am I kidding, after what just happened, there's no way you're going to have enough time to heal before we need you Spartans."

"What's been going on?" I asked, raisin myself up on one arm.

"You don't know?" she asked.

"You may want to fill us in, we were in a War Game all morning," Josh said, moving over from Asad to hear better.

"The Covenant found Reach," she said softly. "They gave it all they could, but it wasn't enough. It's all gone. Just dust, echoes, and ashes. Earth is all we have left now."

****Author's Note****

****A lot more dialog in this chapter than I wanted, but I feel like it worked out well.****

****About the armor: I am using Halo: Reach permutations for my armor in order to fit with the cheaper Spartan III armors and the time frame the story is in right now.****

****Thank you to those who are reading my story! I just recently reached 1,000 views, and I gotta say thank you for inspiring me to keep writing. Without you guys, this story wouldn't exist. So, thanks again.****

****Until next time, R&R!****

12. Dropping In

****1000 Hours, October 21, 2552****

****Sol System, Outer Atmosphere of Earth****

I walked to the bridge of the UNSC _Inclement Weather_. As I walked by, the two marines guarding the entrance saluted and let me pass. As I stepped onto the bridge, a wild frenzy of activity was taking place. Bridge personnel were moving everywhere, shouting out information from their different terminals. Terminals surrounded the middle of the room, which contained a large holotable with a great deal of flashing red and green lights representing our forces and the Covenant.

Standing next to the table was a thin, short man who was gazing out the viewport in front of him. He had a grey uniform and a matching cap, with the two bars of a Captain on his shoulder.

I walked up behind him and saluted.

"Captain."

The man turned around.

Captain Redwood wasn't the best of captains. He had been the captain of one of the UNSC's few destroyers, but had lost it within a month of command. One covenant scout corvette had gutted the ship, and in a moment of panic, Redwood had ordered all hands to abandon ship. The pods that had launched were fish in a barrel, dead as soon as they exited the tubes. But, they served as enough of a distraction for the good captain to make his escape. There were no survivors except for him and his bridge crew.

On his return, he had been court martialed, but there had been no wrong doing found. He had ordered hands to abandon ship, had detonated it as per the Cole Protocol, and had attempted to rescue other survivors. But, the brass had never trusted him with a large command again, and he had been captain of this ship since 2537.

"Ah," he said, after he had returned my salute and asked me to stand at ease. "Are the Spartans ready, son?"

"Yes sir. We're waiting for your order."

"Very good. Maybe we can get the jump on the apes before they even know what's happened. Head on over to the drop bay with the rest of your buddies, we're getting ready to drop you soon. Your final briefing will be in ten minutes."

"Understood sir." I saluted again and started to walk off the bridge.

As I walked away, I couldn't help but stare out the viewport. Two MAC stations were in pieces, flying through space almost lazily. One station was left, but it was heavily damaged. The broken hulls of ships, both UNSC and Covenant, littered the space all around us. And beneath it all, Earth.

Two days ago, we had intercepted a transmission from Cairo Station, the one remaining orbital MAC station that Earth was under attack. We had already been enroute to Earth, as its defenses were being strengthened in case of attack. But, it apparently hadn't been enough. The wreckage moved in the void, a reminder of the tremendous loss of life.

As I reached the elevator and pressed the button for the drop bay, I looked at my helmet in my hands. It was the same recon helmet I had been given a couple months ago, but with a few changes. The red stripe down the center of the helmet was now a thick lightning bolt, reaching down to the top of my gold visor. The CNM was attached as well, but I had also added a camera to the side to give me both a wider view and for recording purposes. The armor I was wearing was similar, with red lightning replacing the stripes, with a little extra red thrown in. On the clamps that had held sniper rounds on my shoulders were extra clips for my assault rifle.

I reached the drop bay and stepped inside. Jacob was sitting on a crate on the far side of the bay, sharpening his knife on his armor. He had the standard recruit armor, with a rising sun in the center of it, like the old Japanese war flags of the 20th century. We had all asked him why he wanted the standard set, but he had only smiled and brushed us off. On his wrist was a TACPAD, useful for commanding the team. He gave me a nod as I stepped into the bay.

Austin gave me a Spartan smile over his helmet and went back to adjusting his scope. He was wearing black and white armor, with the Hazop variants for both his helmet and shoulders. He had a silver visor. On his chest plate, he had two sets of grenades in a bandolier on either side of his chest. On his lower back was a pack of C10 and a can of C7 on his hip. He always was saying that we never knew when we needed more explosives.

Simon was messing with his shotgun, pumping the slide back and forth to make sure it wouldn't jam. He was a giant in his armor compared to the rest of us, standing at six feet tall. His armor was blue and black, with a spider web design around the chest plate. His helmet was the pilot variant with a black visor, and EVA variants for his shoulders. His chest plate was the Assault permutation, with extra shotgun shells on his wrist.

Kara was busy sliding attachments onto her SRS, making sure it would be accurate in a city. Her armor was the standard olive green, with

no design on it. She had the standard Scout permutation for her entire armor set. The only difference was that she had a green visor instead of the usual colors of gold, blue, silver, and regular.

Hannah was loading clips for her SMGs, which were much better for close range combat and were great for suppressing fire. She was wearing an EVA helmet with a gold visor, with Mark V shoulder plates. She had the Multi-Threat chest plate with a yellow bull's-eye painted over it. She always joked that it would probably make the Covies shoot worse, since their aim was so poor.

In the corner of the bay was Nova and Raptor teams. The rest of the Spartans had gone to other drop bays because we all couldn't fit in one bay. I nodded to Josh and ignored the rest of his team as I walked across the rest of the room to my SOEIV.

I racked the bolt of my assault rifle and placed it into the slot to my right, but kept my sidearm on me. I glanced into the confined space, and quickly looked away. I was not looking forward to being in a confined space, hurtling at high velocity from a high altitude with burning hot temperatures surrounding me. I shuddered. My fear of heights still hadn't lessened over the years.

A blue light came from one of the projectors in the room and produced the form of Athena, with her Greek robes and a helmet on her head.

"Mornin' Athena," Josh said with a mock bow as his team and Raptor joined us.

"Good morning Spartan G315. I am here for your briefing, but I must make it short, as they require my full attention on the bridge due to the battle raging through the space around us."

A hologram of a city appeared to her right.

"As you all know, two days ago, Earth was attacked by a small group of Covenant ships. One made it down to this city, New Mombasa. It contained a high ranking Prophet, but it-"

"I'm sorry ma'am, butâ€¦ what's a Prophet?" Jacob asked.

"It is a high ranking official in the Covenant hierarchy. I am sure you are aware of the Unggoy, the Kig-Yar, the Sangheili, the Jiralhanae, and the Lekgolo?"

"Yeah, the Grunts, Jackals, Elites, Brutes, and Hunters," Austin piped up as he tried to cram a rocket launcher into his pod.

"Exactly. The Prophets are their ruling class. As I was saying, the ship with the Prophet made a Slipspace jump inside of the city, causing massive destruction and loss of life. Caught up in the explosion was a group of ODSs that were attempting to board the ship and capture the Prophet. Your specific job is to drop into the city, find as many of those ODSs as you can, and bring them safely back to our lines. Stealth is optional, but it is heavily advised, as the city is under enemy control. Any questions?"

"What kind of support will we have?" I asked, staring anxiously at my pod. I felt like I was about to throw up. Hey, you would to if you had to jump from orbit in a superheated, fast-moving deathtrap.

"You will have no support on this mission. All of our forces are busy holding off the Covenant on the ground and in space. They cannot be spared."

"Understood," I said, nodding. We would be going in with no support to find a bunch of missing soldiers who we didn't even know the location of to bring them back to a failing resistance, while being surrounded at all times. I loved my job.

"Very well Spartans, drop will be in three minutes. Make sure you are ready, and then take a seat in your pods. The leaders of each team will check to be sure your pods are airtight, then we will be ready to send you on your way."

I placed my helmet over my head, but didn't polarize the visor.

"Hey, Jacob."

"Yeah?"

"Where in New Mombasa are we landing in?"

He shrugged. "Come to think of it, I don't really know. I'll let you know when we're in the pods. My pod needs to adjust your pod to make sure that you hit the landing zone, so I'm sure I'll be able to figure it out. You hear that, Eclipse? We're going in a little blind!"

A chorus of affirmatives went up, then everyone started to head to their respective pods. I gulped and stepped into mine. The hatch flew over the front of the pod and locked into place. I started to breathe a little bit more quickly. Sure, I had run simulations of this in training. Sure, I felt we were ready, but I couldn't shake the fear as I heard a tap on my pod. I tapped back.

One minute later, the pod started to move. I started to sweat. Soon, I was on the underbelly of the Inclement Weather. I looked down. Far below me was the continent of Africa, with swirling white clouds flying over it. If I concentrated with my enhanced eyesight, I could see little flashes of light all over the planet; explosions occurring from the Covenant invasion.

Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap, oh crap, I'm so freaking high up!

Two screens flashed on, showing Josh and Jacob. Jacob flashed a thumbs up. "Are you guys ready? Sound off!"

"Eclipse Two here. About as ready as we'll ever be," I heard Kara respond.

"Eclipse Three, ready to rock," Simon said.

"Eclipse Four, let's blow some crap up!" I heard Austin say giddily.

"Eclipse Five," I said, now shaking in my seat. "Nervous as heck, but still ready to go!"

"Eclipse Six, ready when you are," Hannah said, finishing the sound off.

"We have ten seconds you guys, brace yourselves!"

The pod made a beeping noise for each second that ticked by. Then, everything went wrong.

I saw a flash of blue strike the bridge of the _Inclement Weather_, causing a rumble to go through the ship. A fireball leapt out of the ship and began to race towards us.

"Screw it, jump now!" I heard Josh shout, yelling at the top of his voice.

I saw the pods around me begin to fall away from the underbelly of the ship. But mine didn't budge. I shook the pod, but it didn't move. It was stuck!

"Darnit, move you piece of crap! Move!" I yelled desperately as the fireball reached the MAC gun, less than two hundred meters ahead of me.

"Darren, you alright over there? What's happening!"

"My pod's jammed! It won't move!"

"Try to shift your weight around, it might break it loose!"

I began to jump again, shifting the pod back and forth. The pod moved a little bit with a shower of sparks coming down the window in front of me.

I looked up. 100 meters. Seventy-five meters. Fifty meters.

"_Move!_" I gave one final jump, and with a burst of sparks, the pod broke free. Next thing I knew, I was in free-fall. I looked above me to the _Inclement Weather_. It was wreathed in explosions, slowly drifting into the atmosphere. A beam of plasma smashed through the ship again, and with a final explosion, sealed the ship's fate. The _Inclement Weather_ was blown to pieces, filling the space around where it had been with metal and bodies of the crew. I gagged and looked down.

I had reached the atmosphere, by now. I could see the metropolis of New Mombasa spread out beneath me, growing larger every second. The drop was not supposed to be a long one, as we were in low orbit. My pod was so hot, I could feel it in my armor.

"Darren, are you alright!?" I heard Hannah yell over the comm.

"Yes, I'm fine. That was a close one!"

"Darren. Darren, come in. Darren!" Jacob yelled.

They can't hear me. My radio's broken!

I felt the yank of the chute over the pod pull taut. I thumped the side of my helmet and tried again.

"I'm alright you guys!"

"Darren! We thought you were a goner." I heard Simon say. "Too bad it wasn't true."

"Hey, screw you."

I heard the others laugh as a fire began to surround the outside of my pod.

I joined them, but then I stopped.

How many Spartans, Marines, and Navy crewmen had just died?

With that happy thought, I fell to New Mombasa.

****Author's Note: I have exams coming up, so this will be the last chapter for a while. I hope it's good enough to keep you busy for the next couple of weeks. I would also like to respond to the guest who is reviewing each of my chapters. Your reviews have helped me **_**so**_** much. Thank you! I also want to thank each of you who are reading this.****

****Until next time, R&R!****

13. Regroup and Reorganize

0500 Hours, November 22, 2552

New Mombasa, Africa

My pod hit the ground with a deafening boom. My pod scraped along the pavement of a street near the center of New Mombasa, occasionally bouncing a few meters before hitting the ground again. Finally, the pod hit a wall and came to a jolting stop.

I didn't hear any of it though. My heart was still beating like a drum from my brush with death, overpowering my sense of hearing. When my pod stopped, I pressed the three release buttons for the hatch in front of me. It didn't budge. I sighed.

What a great start to the day...

I gripped the edge of the hatch, and with as much force I could muster, pushed. The hatch tore free with a loud grinding screech and flew a good ten meters before skidding to a stop.

I grinned. The enhancements were definitely working.

My COM crackled as I reached down for my MA5C in the weapon slot to my left.

"Eclipse One to Eclipse Five. You alright over there, Darren?"

"Just a little shaken up. But, if I ever have to step into one of the

deathtraps again, it'll be too soon."

"You would go in if you were ordered too."

"Yeah, but I still wouldn't have to like it," I muttered.

He laughed. Most likely his way of getting rid of the horrifying realization that he had just been about to lose one of his best friends: me. Or at least, I hoped so.

Then it hit me. I had almost died. I mean, I knew I was probably going to die anyways. I was expendable. But stillâ€¦

"Alright, everyone, RV on my pod." Jacob said. "I'll set up a waypoint. I've already located where the beacon from the weapons crate is located. We will be meeting the other teams there. Copy?"

A line of green dots went off over my HUD, meaning the rest of the team was on the way.

I took a look around from where my pod landed. I had landed in a small and rare piece of field with trees and lush underbrush. I hadn't noticed until now that my pod had gone through one of the many apartment buildings around me. I could clearly see through the ground floor of the building in front of me. A large, painted sign said:
GLASS THIS! I chuckled.

As I racked a round into the chamber of my rifle, a blue NAV marker appeared in the distance, about six hundred meters from my current location. I sighed.

Just my luck. I thought bitterly. First I almost died, next I had to hoof it the farthest to get to the team. Today was just getting better and better.

I began to slowly and deliberately pick my way through the heavy bushes of the courtyard/field I was in.

Something wasn't right though. I heard the bush behind me moved every single time I did, as though something was following me. But, every time I looked back, there would only be the the swaying foliage of the wake I was creating in the sea of green. I looked at my motion sensor. No contact. I shrugged.

Just as I took my first step forward, I heard a loud screech come from directly behind me. I turned in a blur of motion, already dodging as a green plasma bolt flew past my head and bringing out my knife from its sheath on my chest. I swiftly slit the neck of the Jackal that had managed to sneak up on me. It grabbed its throat, gurgling desperately, trying to breath with the giant gash in its windpipe to no avail.

I watched in satisfaction as the alien slid into the green behind me, never to rise again.

My first kill.

"Eclipse One, contact. Scratch one freak."

"Copy."

I cut through the torn open building in front of me and came out onto the street. All around me was wrecked cars, twisted metal and debris, as well as bullets casings and plasma burns. Choking black smoke filled the air. It was eerily quiet as I slowly picked my way down the street to a plaza.

Then I came across my first body. It was a small child, clutching a teddy bear in her right hand and a disembodied hand in her left. There was no other body. I carefully turned her over. She was missing half of her face, as if a plasma bolt had hit her there. I dropped her and instantly took a few steps back. Her one eye seemed to be staring right at me. It was making feel nauseous.

Then, I remembered something I had heard in training from Mendez.

"There are always casualties in war. Many are not preventable, but some are. You can't focus on the deaths you couldn't stop from happening. You have to keep your mind on preventing anymore people from dying. Especially your team."

I took a little comfort from that. But the girl was still staring. I quickly side-skirted around the girl and continued through the debris. There were other bodies, but I didn't make the mistake of looking at them.

I finally made it to Jacob's pod. I made a mental count. Everyone was here except for Kara. I assumed that she was on top of a building nearby, scouting and keeping a lookout for the Covenant and the ODSs. "Coming in from the north, don't shoot." I said as I stepped into view.

"So very tempting," Simon said, sarcasm heavy in his voice as he looked up. I couldn't see his face through his black visor, but I could tell that he was smiling.

"Shut up, Simon."

Hannah ran up and began moving a bioscanner over me. I stiffened.

"Are you alright Darren? You really freaked us out up there."

"I'm fine. Nothing to complain about."

"You sure about that? Anything hurt, or-"

"I'm fine."

I couldn't see through her visor, but I could tell that she frowned.

"That'sâ€¦ Good."

"Seriously, nothing's hurt. A little sore from the landing, but other than that, nothing."

"Alright. We were worried about you on the way down."

"Thanks."

"You guys, something tells me that we're not gonna be hearing anything from our handler." Jacob was saying as we joined the rest of the group. "So we're both blind and solo on this op. Kara, you see anything up there?"

A green dot appeared on my HUD.

"Great. Alright, judging from the network, we landed near the center of the city. Before the ship went down, Athena was telling me that the ODS'Ts were last seen near Kizingo Boulevard. That's about five clicks from here. First, though, we need to meet up with Nova at the supply drop. _That_ is about five blocks away. We're moving out now. Any questions?"

Silence.

"Alright then. Keep an eye out, and remember, we're behind enemy lines. Covies could be anywhere. Kara, stay on top of the buildings. Let us know if you see anything. Let's move!"

****Author's Note:** Well. Hello again. It has been a while. Like, three months. I deeply apologize about this. I got lazy, and lost a little of the spark for this story. But I'm back (I think) and ready to bring you guys more chapters. Let's do this!**

****PS:** This story will not have anything to do with Halo 3: ODS'T. As awesome as that would be, I am not much of an AU writer. So, these are gonna be different ODS'Ts. ******

****Alright,** that's about it. Please keep reviewing; you have no idea how much it keeps me going. If you see any inconsistencies with the story or the with the Halo universe, please tell me.******

****Until next time, R&R!****

14. Contact

****0600 Hours, November 22, 2552****

****New Mombasa, Africa****

We slowly picked our way through the streets. In the distance, I could hear explosions and gunfire, but it was miles away. The part of the city we were in was dead.

Literally.

We barely made any noise. Above us, Kara was sweeping the streets behind and in front of us with her keen eyes. She had already led us through a few patrols of Brutes, Grunt, and Jackals without being spotted.

I scanned the buildings around us intently, with my assault rifle at the ready. Just because the street was clear didn't mean the buildings were too.

Hannah was holding one of her two SMGs in her right hand and monocular in the other. Although our helmets could zoom in if we wanted to, there was a limit to what it could do. Having the monocular helped with spotting ground targets. Combined with the night vision in our helmets, it was a useful tool.

Simon was on point, shotgun at the ready, his black visor hiding a dark frown. I could tell from the way he had his shoulders that he did not like this. At all. Jacob was right behind him, scanning above us with a DMR. Austin was trailing behind, making sure there was no one following us. No surprises for us. Hopefully.

"We're coming up on the supply drop now. Everyone keep an eye out for Nova," Jacob said as we entered a wide plaza. In the center was a small stone pavilion with a series of steps leading towards it. Wrecked cars, Warthogs, Ghosts, and Wraiths were everywhere.

"Picked a heck of a spot, Jacob. Just like The Arena on Onyx," Simon said as we approached the glowing red box sitting just beside the pavilion. "That place was a freaking bloodbath. I hated that exercise."

"You and everyone else, Simon," Austin muttered as he scanned the surrounding buildings with his BR.

"Kara, are you in a good position?" Jacob asked.

A green light appeared on our HUDs.

"Good. Anyone hear anything from Nova?"

"No," Hannah said. "No radio contact. With anyone. We're on our own right now."

"Maybe we should try to get above or destroy any jammers the Covies have set up soon," I suggested. "We need to-"

_Boom! _A burst of blue plasma marred with metal, gravel, and dirt flew into the air near the entrance of the plaza across from us.

"Contact!" I heard Hannah say as we started to go prone.

We all hit the ground behind some burned out cars, but the sudden explosion hadn't been aimed at us. Gunfire started to sound, with plasma fire answering with its characteristic whine. I peeked over the edge of the car. Sprinting from the entrance was a group of five. One of them was limping, being led along by the others while under fire from an unseen enemy. I squinted.

"Uh, Jacob, I think I just found Nova."

Jacob peeked over the edge too and cursed. "Alright you guys, let's go help Josh and his team out. Kara, keep 'em covered! Austin, stay here and get ready in case we need to fall back. You know what to do. Darren, Simon, Hannah, you're with me. Let's move!"

We leapt over the car and ran to the pavilion, where Nova was currently taking cover.

After we had received our armor, the others had taken the stuff we had left behind. Each member of Nova was also in his or her own customized armor set. Josh had a Commando variant helmet with a red visor and a CNM attachment on it. His shoulders were both Hazop variants, with a PARA chest plate.

I could tell Nova was on their last leg. Each of them were sagging as if they hadn't had a break today. Their armor was singed in different places, and in one person's case, the visor was cracked down the middle. Lying in the middle of them all, right next to Josh, was Asad. Wounded.

At first, red filled my vision. Why should we help him? He had put me in the medical bay for _weeks_. He was absolutely crazy. I stopped myself.

What's in the past is in the past. Let it go. Wow. That was mature of me.

We finally entered the pavilion.

"Josh!" Jacob yelled as we reached them. "What the heck happened?"

Josh, who was taking care of his downed squad mate while firing, took his eyes off of the alleyway and glanced towards us. His red-tinted helmet gave away nothing. His voice did.

"Jenna's gone."

He bowed his head.

I didn't know really who Jenna was, but she was a Spartan, and that was good enough for me. I put my hand on his armored shoulder.

"I'm sorry, man."

He nodded. "Asad here was hit. She tried to get to him, but there was a Wraith, and—"

Jacob nodded. "Let's try to save the rest of your squad now. You need to hold that mourning back for a little longer, OK?"

If Josh hadn't been wearing a helmet, I could have sworn that he was on the verge of tears. He took a deep breath and sighed.

"Alright, let's do it."

"How many were there?" Hannah asked as she brought out some biofoam for Asad.

"Easily twenty to thirty on foot plus armored support. We were under attack as soon as we landed."

"Got it," Jacob replied. "Kara, you hear that?"

"Loud and clear."

"Woe, she speaks!" I exclaimed in mock joy.

She promptly ignored me and continued. "I'm seeing the group Josh mentioned. They're-" She stopped in shock. "They're falling back!"

"Wait, what?" I heard Simon ask over the COM. "Covies never retreat. At leastâ€|"

"Not without a reason," I heard Austin say ominously as the sound of a distant discharge of plasma swarmed over us.

I looked up. A large blue trail of plasma was steadily falling towards us. "Everybody ,get back!"

We all scrambled to exit the pavilion. On the way out, Josh tried to grab Asad, but stumbled. I groaned and turned back. I grabbed one of Asad's hands and gave a nod to Josh. He nodded in return and we started pulling.

It was at that moment that Asad woke up from the haze of pain around him.

"Ahhhhh! What the frick!"

"Calm down, Asad, you'll bleed out," I muttered under my breath. His light blue visor locked on to me.

"You!?"

"Me."

"Hurry up, guys!" I heard Austin yell as we raced toward the line of cars with Asad in tow, yelling and cursing the whole way. The plasma that had been launched suddenly landed on the pavilion behind us with a loud boom. I turned. The stone had been broken and melted into slag; there was literally nothing left.

I shuddered and kept running.

Just as we reached the line of cars, a large blue vehicle raced from the road ahead of us and launched another orb of blue into the sky. A Wraith. And, as if things weren't bad enough, another Wraith followed right behind it.

"Well, crap."

"Jacob!"

"What have you got for me Kara?" Jacob replied.

"Those thirty infantry are coming around your flank! You gotta move, now!"

"Double crap."

****Author's Note: Cliffhanger. 'Nuff said.****

****Not much to say about this chapter. Nova is wrecked. Eclipse will save the dayâ€| Maybe?***

****Well, anyways, keep reviewing. Special shout out to My Wunderwaffle**

iz missin for the consistent reviews. Thank you so much! Please keep reviewing, it gives me more motivation to bring you more chapters quicker, like this one.**

Thanks for reading, and as always, R&R!

15. Baptism By Fire

0630 Hours, November 22, 2552

New Mombasa, Africa

It seemed as if the world was on fire. Bright blue fire, yes, but fire nonetheless. The troops on our flank were closing in while the Wraiths bombarded our position. Asad was complaining about the hundred-meter drag we had just put him through, Austin was prepping his rockets, while Simon readied his grenade launcher. Like I've said that Austin said before, never too many explosives.

"Frag out!" I yelled from beside Hannah, arming the M9 HE-DP grenade in my hand. I chucked it over the car we had moved behind us, and after a pause, heard and felt the characteristic _whump_ of it going off, followed by the alien screams and yells of its victims. I jumped up to fire a sustained burst from my assault rifle- and promptly ducked back down, the area where my head had been filled with plasma.

"Jacob, if you have any ideas, I'm all for it!" Austin yelled as he shot another rocket at a Wraith fifty meters away. The shot connected, but didn't destroy it. The second rocket flew and caused the Wraith to combust into orange, yellow, and blue fire, its shattered wreck slowly settling to the ground.

The remaining Wraith, on seeing the wreck of its former partner, began to fire its plasma even faster, dodging left and right. The Brute in the turret began to spray with reckless abandon, filling the air above us with heat. But it never hit us. I think it was trying to keep us pinned in so the infantry could get the kill. How courteous.

"Anybody have any flash bangs?" Jacob yelled over the comm.

"Here!" Hannah said, bringing up a trio of grey metal cylinders.

"Good! Hand them out and toss 'em on my mark! Austin, prep your rockets. Kara, I want you to open fire on the troops behind us on my mark as well!"

We all nodded and prepped our weapons.

Jacob crawled over and pointed at me. "Darren, you have the hard part. You need to keep the Wraith busy while Austin draws a bead on it."

I gulped but nodded. _I can do itâ€¦ I think._

Hannah handed me a flash bang. "Don't do anything stupid, OK?"

I chuckled. "I'm already charging a Wraith. How much more stupid does it get?"

"Well, just in caseâ€¦"

She reached around me and gave me a hug. I stiffened at first, but returned it after a second. We parted and she put a Spartan smile on her face. "Go get 'em."

I nodded and returned the smile.

I heard a grunt from behind me and whirled. Simon was crouching looking at us in shock.

"Break it up, guys. You could get away with that in basic, but out here, put a lid on it," Jacob said.

Did I mention we were sort of dating? Yeah, probably should have said something about that.

At this point, the Brutes and Grunts were almost on top of us. I peeked over the car hood in front of me. No Elites. Hmmmâ€¦

It wasn't odd that they weren't attacking with the brutes, but we had learned in training that their tactics were for terror inducing attacks only. The fact that they were leading a regular ground assault struck me as odd.

I turned to the Wraith again and sighed. _Here we go._

"Three, two, one, mark!"

I tossed the flash bang behind me, vaulted the car, and stepped into the blackened area surrounding our cover and booked it. The air filled with crystalline shards and blue and red plasma as the Covenant tried to fill the air in our general direction. I ducked and weaved through the projectiles, keeping an eye out for the wraith. I heard gunfire from behind me as the others began to fire into the group of Covenant, but I didn't turn around.

I felt a small thump against the side of my armor, and my shields dropped a little. I guess they did work. Whaddaya know? Even as I admired the fact that I wasn't burned to a crisp right now, a few needler rounds found my armor and struck it as I tried to dodge them. An alarm in my suit went off, with red lights flashing on my HUD. I was out of shield.

"Frick!"

I glanced at the Wraith again. It was tracking me as I sprinted around the courtyard. It lobbed a large blue orb into the air, right into my path. I jumped back, planted my feet, and took off another way. I could feel the adrenaline burning in my system as I desperately dodged another mortar blast. The gunner opened up and dowsed the area around me in blue and burning metal. As I turned, I felt a dull thud against my armor on my chest but ignored it. I could hear the volume of fire diminishing behind me.

"Austin, if you don't fire your rockets in five freaking seconds, I swear I'll haunt you after I die forever!" I yelled as I dodged the

Wraith as it tried to run me over.

"Then back up! Here comes the heat!"

I leap backwards and rolled into a ball. The familiar streaming trail of a 102mm rocket flew through the air and struck the tank. It blew apart the front, revealing the inner workings of the Wraith. The gunner was nowhere to be seen. It slowly settled to the ground.

I uncurled myself and slowly got up to inspect the damage. As I approached the Wraith, I hear a loud, animalistic growl. I raised my rifle and continued forward. Sitting inside of the tank was a heavily burned Brute, his yellow armor charred and covered with soot.

At the sight of me it tried to lunge, but was pulled back by something. As I got nearer, I noticed that its arms were burnt into the machinery of its once powerful vehicle. Its hate-filled eyes met the gold of my visor as I marched forward. I took aim. The Brute reared its head, presumably to howl for help or backup, when I fired a sustained burst into its forehead.

At first, its power armor protected it, but soon the 7.62mm rounds penetrated its thick skull and it slouched forward, dead. I lowered my rifle, grunted in satisfaction, and headed back to the others.

They were busy gathering ammo, sticky grenades, and other items from the dead Covie bodies scattered around the cars we had been taking cover behind.

"I think that's why the Covenant never truly win. They're too cocky," Kara said from her position on top of the building next to us.

"Yeah, but for good reason. Look what planet we're on," I said.

Just then, I noticed a slight pain in my chest. Not much really, just a stinging sensation. I felt down the front of my armor with my hand. It came back dripped in crimson. My vision swirled.

I heard Hannah scream. I looked down. A large hole was melted into the front of chest plate all the way to the skin, which was covered in heavy burns. Then the pain hit me. I was on fire. I stumbled and fell to the ground.

"Darren! Holy crap! Someone, get his helmet off!"

"I need some bandages on the wound. Now!"

I felt armored hands press against my chest, hard. All around me was a swirl of voices.

"What happened!?"

"No, no, no, no, no no no no no!"

"C'mon man, stay with us!"

My vision started to go dark. The voices sounded muffled, as if they were from behind a pillow. I looked up and saw the remains of the

Wraith, with the Brute still fused into the driver's seat. Its ape-like grin was still on its face.

The last feeling I had was a sense of falling into darkness.

****Author's Note****

****So, overriding the frontal lobe during combat is dangerous? Say whaaaat!? So, yeah, here's another chapter for you beautiful people. Combat with the Covies. I knew we'd get there eventually! Also, Hannah and Darren are dating, sort of. As much dating as possible for Spartans. That's a thing now.****

****Thank you for reading, and until next time, please, please, **_**please**_**, review.****

****Peace out!****

16. Welcome Back

****2300 Hours, November 24, 2552****

****New Mombasa, Africa****

I woke with a start, and immediately felt my chest explode into pain. Where was I!? What was going on!? Where was everyone!? Why did my chest feel like it was on fire!?

I felt a hand push down on me and a voice tell me to stay still. I couldn't tell who it was, but I felt like I could trust this person. My hearing felt muddled and my vision was blurry.

Then I remembered. The attack. The Wraith. Andâ€¦ My own deeply crimson blood covering my armored glovesâ€¦

I laid down onto my back, trying to relax. The pain stayed for a few minutes, but eventually disappeared. I tried to breath a sigh of relief, but it hurt. I sighed. _That_ hurt too.

Crap.

"Just lay still. I can't put this on if your moving."

I felt a cold, stinging sensation flow throughout my chest. Biofoam. I finally took a deep breath for the first time since I had been awake. The pain was reduced, but not entirely gone. The stinging sucked too, but it was better. That was how bad it hurt.

My vision finally started to clear up. Sitting next to me, with a now empty biofoam can, was Hannah. She smiled as I looked at her.

"Hey."

"Hey," I replied in a quiet croak.

"I'll get you some water. Stay here."

I nodded and watched her as she headed across the room. I was lying on a bed in the corner of a large, spacious room. Everything was laced in red and gold, with expansive and expensive carpets covering the floor. The walls were covered in exquisite art pieces. I recognized one of them: The Siege of Madrigal. It depicted a planet being attacked by the Covenant, alone and unprotected. The planet was being glassed, with pillars of plasma hitting Madrigal. I sighed. The same would happen to Earth if we couldn't beat back the Covenant.

Covering the far wall was a large, glass window. I could see the smoking city in the dark, fires spread everywhere, buildings toppled, and flickering lights where holoscreens were once displaying advertisements.

Hannah came back with the water.

After I took a long drink, I asked, "Where is everyone?"

"We're all along this floor. We found the ODSTs near here at the New Mombasa Police Department. There are quite a few of them. Around fifteen or so, led by a Staff Sergeant Burke. They had been hoping to reach another squad after hearing them over the radio, but were pinned down at the base of the building for a day. Even after carrying you through the city, we got them out, but they lost about ten men or so. And-"

"Hold on for a sec, Hannah. Too much, too fast."

She winced. "Sorry."

"You're good."

So, find ODSTs, check. Fortify location, check. Extractionâ€¦

"So, how are we getting out of here?"

She bit her lip. "We haven't even established contact with the UNSC. Anything we broadcast meets static. Jacob finally ordered us to stop because Simon says the Covies were probably attempting to track our signal. I think they're just afraid there really is no one to listen."

"We're gonna need to find our own way out, huh?"

"Seems like it. I never asked how you were feeling."

"Like I got shot. Hurts like heck. Biofoam is helping a little. When can I be up and moving again?"

She sighed. "Well, if we weren't in a combat zone, I'd say give it a few days. As it is, try not to strain it or rip off the bandages on it, and you should be fine."

"Thanks."

Hannah moved closer and whispered, "I was so worried. I thought you were going to die."

I laughed, but ended up with a hacking cough. After a few seconds of

trying to get back my breath, I answered, "You know me. It'll take more than one plasma shot to kill me. It's weird though. When I was dodging the Wraith, I didn't _feel_ like I had been hit. I felt just fine."

Hannah turned around and brought her hands up to her overregulation hair. She always messed with it when figuring out a problem.

"I have no idea why, Darren. You should've felt _something_. Your armor plate had melted to your chest. It had be at least 1,000 degrees. Asad had the same thing happen to him. One minute, fighting. Nextâ€¦"

"On the ground," I finished. At the mention of Asad, I tensed up, but Hannah didn't notice.

"Exactly. It's weird. I'll ask Simon to poke around. He's good with that stuff."

"Alright."

Hannah stood up and began to walk towards the door.

"I need to go check on the others and Asad. I'll be back soon. I'm glad your back."

I nodded and settled further into my soft bed.

She reached the door and grasped the handle. "I love you."

"You too."

****Well, Darren is back and so am I. Let's go! I recently just got two thousand views. Two. Thousand. What. I am so thankful for your support, and I hope you will continue enjoying this story. Thank you to those reviewing, you are help me in more ways than you know.****

'Til next time, Read and Review!**'**

17. Prepare for Pain

****0500 Hours, November 24, 2552****

****New Mombasa, Africa****

I woke up to the sound of rain pattering on the window. I felt the large burn on my chest throb as I slowly sat up. I couldn't see anything out of the window due to a haze of smoke surrounding the city, but I'm pretty sure that I would have seen the same sight I had viewed the last time I was awake.

I threw the sheets off of me and slid off the bed.

Aaaaah! I clutched my chest as it gave an extremely painful throb and clenched my teeth. I slowly dragged myself through my room, trying to forget the pain. Pain was weakness, and weakness had no place right now.

I opened the door to a bustle of activity. On all sides I was surrounded by ODS'Ts cleaning weapons, sharpening knives, and simply talking. As soon as the slid closed behind me, a silence filled the room. Each Helljumper turned to face me. I saw a varied degree of emotions across their faces. Awe, shock, annoyance, and, in some cases, even anger.

I paused and stared back. Actually, a lot of them seemed angry.

_What did _I_ do?_

"Hey Darren!" I started and turned to face the person striding across the room. It was Austin, in full armor minus his helmet. "Good to see you getting around! Last time I checked, you weren't looking too good."

"Yeah, hopefully I can do more than just get around. Give me some painkillers and I'm good to go."

"That's great, because we might have a problem. I was about to head over to where we've set up shop. Wanna come with?"

"Sure."

As we were walking away, an ODS'T who thought we couldn't hear or see him muttered "Freaks."

"What the heck is their problem?" I asked Austin as we walked down a long, winding hallway with offices on either side.

"They're just upset that they're not the best anymore. It's a pride issue, as far as I can tell."

"Gotcha."

We reached an office with the title of ****Commissioner Kinsler**** on it.

"Well, here it is, our temporary HQ. Your armor is inside. Simon has been tinkering with it, trying to fix the, you know, the giant melted slag of metal that was your chest plate," Austin said as he touched to door control.

"Thanks a lot man."

"Don't thank me, thank Simon."

We stepped inside.

Inside was the rest of my squad. Hannah rushed up to me and forced me into a chair.

"You shouldn't be standing up, or even be moving around!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

"What, you going to stop me from helping?"

She sighed. "No, but you need to be careful. You should have died from that hit. You should at least take it easier."

"I'll take it easier when I'm dead," I replied, standing up and giving an easy smile.

As I turned from her, I heard a barely audible whisper: "That's what I'm afraid of."

I nodded at Simon, who looked up from his work on my armor to give me a nod in return.

"Might want to see Jacob and Burke."

"What's happening?" I asked as I started toward the aforementioned leaders.

Simon shook his head and pointed at Jacob. I shrugged and walked over and heard the tail end of the two's conversation.

"I don't care how enhanced or hard to kill you Spartans are, there's enough Covenant gathering to squash us like a bug on a windshield. I need to worry about the safety of my men. They've already been through hell. There's no way--"

He stopped when he saw me.

"Looks like the freaks are all here. Yippee. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to tell my soldiers that we are about to move out, Lieutenant." He gave a mock salute and brushed past me and briskly walked out of the room.

Jacob gave a loud sigh and placed some of his weight onto the metal desk in front of him. The metal dented because of the armor he was wearing, but held. He stared down at the desk for a moment, lost in thought, then looked up suddenly and smiled.

"It's good to see you up, Darren. You had us worried."

I smiled too. "Yeah, Hannah told me. I've been walking around with Austin for a little bit already, looking around. Those ODSs are definitely not the most hospitable."

"You can say that again. Burke especially is a real piece of work, but they're all good soldiers. I saw them fight when we rescued them. They're tough. But that's not important right now."

Jacob turned the computer screen around so I could see it. On the display was a large armored column Wraiths, Ghost, and Revenants in addition to several Banshees. I made a loud whistle.

"How are we getting this feed?"

"Kara followed on the rooftops and placed cameras as we went towards the police station. We knew we would have to stay low so you could recover, so we wanted to be sure we weren't being followed when we decided to hide out."

"Smart. But that meansâ€¦"

Jacob nodded gravely. "Yeah, they're heading right toward us. They must've heard that we took some of them down over here. This is the

problem though. We can either hold out here and try to fight them off, or we can try to outrun them. I've been trying to tell Burke that without our vehicles, we'd be hard-pressed to get away from those Banshees and Ghosts. With our augmentations, we might have a chance, but with ODSs to slow us down, we won't be able to move quick enough."

"That's why I told him we should stay here. We'll have the high ground, and the mortars from the Wraiths can't reach this high. If we can take out the Banshees and a few other vehicles from in here, we can hopefully retreat then. They'll be forced to come upstairs group by group as well. Of course, we would put men on the lower floors, and slow them down. We would be down there with them and provide support."

"It's the only sensible way to deal with this, but Burke can't see that. I don't know how to convince him unless we can figure out a way to get out of here quickly and efficiently. The others have already looked at schematics and maps. They haven't found anything, and neither have I. Maybe you can."

I nodded. "I'll get it done."

Jacob smiled again and handed over a datapad. I quickly walked across the room and accessed the folder labeled "Schematics." I sighed, stood up, grabbed a cup of water from a nearby fountain, and started perusing the designs as fast as I could.

The designs for the building were actually very complex. There were many levels of course, of which we were on the 175th floor. Its top level almost touched the clouds, with nearly five hundred floors in total.

We could figure out a way to base jump or rappel down the building I thought as I saw a landing pad that would make a good jumping point. But it was unlikely that it would work. As well-equipped as us and the ODSs were, we didn't have that gear with us, unless we commandeered some Banshees, which was, again, unlikely. Maybe we could parachute? No, we'd be sitting ducks.

Hold on. I looked more closely at the base of the building. Was that?...

I smiled. "There's our way out."

18. Desupra Mors

0700 Hours, November 24, 2552

New Mombasa, Africa

On the twentieth level of the NMPD, I squinted and my visor enhanced the zoom. A wall of colors met my eyes; the colors of the Covenant. They seemed to fill the street, and as I turned to view the side streets, more of them began to march into the open. I sighed. We were surrounded. I freaking hoped that those on the first floor would work faster on our exit.

I looked around. Next to me was Austin, who was scoping in his BR,

keeping his hands busy and keeping his composure. A squad of ODSs was behind us, though I imagine that they were less than thrilled to be under our command. Jacob, Hannah, and Simon were on the ground level, while the rest of the ODSs scattered the landings of the lower twenty floors. Kara was another ten floors up, about to do what she did best.

Before we had started the long climb down the skyscraper, Hannah had hugged me tight and whispered "Stay safe." But as I looked down on the mass of Covenant troops headed our way, I started to think maybe I should have told her the same. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. She was a Spartan. She would get the job done. _Now, focus._

Austin suddenly stopped moving.

"What?" I said, ducking behind the balcony.

Austin turned and motioned to the ODSs; _get down_.

They responded immediately, falling to the ground without a sound. I was just about to ask him what was wrong, other than the huge crowd of aliens outside our front door, when he whispered "Snipers."

I heard the click of the comm as Austin switched to our squad's channel. "Kara, something's wrong. I think I saw movement in the buildings. Keep your eyes sharp."

A green light blipped on and off, Kara acknowledging the warning. Apparently talking was too hard for her.

Then, a shot rang out. "Sniper down," she said.

"Good work Kara," I heard Jacob say. "But I think you just kicked the hornet's nest."

A multitude of roars rang out amongst the canyons between the buildings as Brutes began to urge on their soldiers toward the building. Of course it had to be Brutes.

"Suicidal maniacs," I heard one of the ODSs mirror my thoughts. "I almost _prefer_ the Elites to-"

"Get off the command frequency!" I heard Burke yell from next to me. He was in charge of the marksman in the upper floors, and indirectly in charge of us, a fact that I didn't consider at all appealing.

"Y-yes sir!"

The aliens opened fire. Green, blue, red, and purple streaked through the air toward us. It was almost beautiful, except for the fact that each streak meant injury or death. I ducked as a line of plasma charred the railing in front of me, turning it a dark black.

"Well crap," I muttered. I raised my rifle, a DMR that I had taken from the ODS weapon cache. I wasn't a very good shot with it, and although I definitely preferred the automatic power of the assault rifle, the weapon was perfect for long-range engagements like this. "Permission to open fire, sir?"

Burke paused a second, as if enjoying being able to control my actions. I gritted my teeth. Then he smiled. "Granted."

I sighted in on a Brute with no helmet and led him a little. I smiled. It was about to learn just how important helmets were. Or, at least its friends were. The rifle bucked a little in my hands as I send a round burrowing through the forehead of the Brute. It fell with its limbs sprawling, like a puppet with cut strings. I surveyed my handiwork and quickly moved to another target. Another five similarly stupid Brutes fell before I ejected the magazine and slammed a new one home. I pushed the bolt forward and started firing again.

Austin opened fire next to me, adding his own three-round bursts to the growing staccato of gunfire sweeping the building. Grunts and Brutes began to fall, but there were still a ton of them. A few Ghosts and Revenants began to charge through the streets, but with no way into the building, the Ghosts were quickly chewed up by gunfire coming from the entrance, and the Revenants were pushed back.

Grunts began carrying large metal bipods to the front line, and started placing them down.

"They're laying down shield generators! Kill 'em before they activate 'em!" Burke roared.

I instantly switched to a Grunt almost finished with his shield and fired. The Grunt slumped over onto the bipod, but not before it activated the shield. I grimaced in from the embarrassment over my late shot and took aim at another Grunt.

It fell over and began to pinwheel around as methane poured from its tank, and hit a few of it own squad before exploding into pieces of flesh and metal. The rest of the Grunt's group disappeared in the blue fireball. Apparently, an explosion too close to plasma grenades could set them off too. I didn't know that.

A chain reaction of explosions blew through the section the Grunt had been in, temporarily destroying any semblance of order in the leading ranks of the Grunts. At least eight had disappeared, with at least another dozen wounded.

"How do you freaking like that!? I rock!" I yelled in extreme satisfaction over my team frequency while pumping my fist in the air. To the ODSs, it probably looked pretty odd, just pumping my fist in the air, but I didn't care.

"That was all luck," Kara muttered over the comm.

"Well, let's see you top it!"

There was a pause, and then a shot rang out. I looked back to the battlefield. An entire pack of ten Brutes had a large hole in their chest. Kara had hit them all in one shot. The entire pack crumpled.

"Show-off," I complained, aiming my rifle again.

"Next time you get too cocky about your aim, just remember that I

will always be better than you are, Darren."

"Screw you."

"Quit joking around guys," I heard Jacob say on the radio. "We need to stay sharp."

"Killjoy," Kara said as she sadly pitied herself before firing another shot. I zoomed in with my scope and shot three times at a Brute, which removed its helmet. I dove to cover behind an abandoned Olifant. I cursed and switched to another target, a Jackal with a Carbine. The DMR cracked and the Jackal's head split open.

I heard a roar over my head and turned to look at the sky- which had twelve Banshees swarming through it toward us.

I hit the ground hard as I heard several cries of warning as they started lobbing large fuel rod rounds at us. Each one hit the side of the building, melting the glass and incinerating anything on their trajectory. A few troopers' screams over the radio suddenly went quiet. Two names blinked out on my display.

An ODST ran up, placed a rocket launcher on his shoulder, locked on, and launched two rockets. Around the building, two other ODSTs fired as well. Six large explosions erupted over our heads. The Banshees quickly changed direction and scattered, instantly becoming much harder targets.

In our lapse in attention to the ground battle, the Grunt had finally deployed shields only one hundred meters from the building. I groaned in frustration as a dome of energy spread over the army in front of us.

And, as if that wasn't enough, no less than ten Wraiths approached from the streets behind the shield and began to lob their deadly plasma at us.

"Crap! We need to take care of those tanks!" Jacob yelled, gunfire loud in my ear from the comm.

"I'm on it! Austin, I need you and Darren down here now! We're gonna hit these freaks from their flanks!" Simon shouted, and a blue waypoint appeared over my visor. I glanced at Burke. He shook his head and waved us along.

"Just don't mess up, Spartan," I heard him mutter as I passed him.

Our building was a hive of activity, with ODST's running through the hallways for better vantage points, looking for ammo already, and to reply to the hysteric calls for "Medic!"

We finally reached the ground floor. Somehow, a pack of ten Brutes or so had made it to the doors. Jacob and the others were pinned down, with hot red spikes flying all around them.

One of the Brutes spotted us and gave a loud roar. Its red eyes glowed as it raised its Spiker- a trio of holes suddenly appeared in its forehead. The Brute stopped, confused, and then, finally realizing it was dead, fell forward. The members of its pack began to howl in

anger and grief.

Austin fired a few more bursts, firmly anchoring the attention of the Brutes to us. Then, as one, the Brutes left cover and began to charge us, completely ignoring the others.

"Oh, screw us!" I yelled as I backpedaled and fired. I emptied an entire magazine into the leading Brute, but he simply shook it off and collided with me.

"Darren!" I heard Hannah scream. My ears were ringing and I felt extremely dizzy. I felt a hand grab me and forced me into a wall. The burns in my chest hurt so freaking bad. I squirmed, trying to break free, but the Brute was too strong. The sound of the shield alarm in my ears was deafening, and the flashing red from the shield bar filled my helmet.

It gave a laugh as it grabbed my throat. I started gasping for air that I couldn't reach. I felt around my chest for my combat knife and felt the metal handle. I spun it out of its sheath and jammed the blade through the Brute's temple. The Brute's iron grip relaxed as it finally sank into death, its ugly grin still on its face.

"Screw you," I spat, and turned to grab my rifle off of the floor, but then I sighed in frustration. The DMR's barrel was badly bent at a thirty-degree angle, making it useless. I tossed the rifle away and pulled out my Assault Rifle from the magnetic strips on my back. I smiled as I hefted the familiar weight of the rifle, but it quickly faded as the sounds of battle finally reached my ears. The foyer of the hotel was pure chaos.

An ODST was actually riding one of the Brutes, repeatedly shooting her magnum into its tough skull, but the animal was on a rampage and had not registered the shots. So it kept trying to grab her off its back so that it could rip her in half. I leapt forward and hit the Brute's chin with the butt of my rifle. Its head turned sharply to the side from the blow, but it quickly recovered and swiped at me.

"I need you to get clear!" I yelled to the ODST on the Brute's back. "Jump off now!"

She nodded, but it was hard to tell if it was her or the Brute still attempting to shake her off. She didn't say anything in fear of biting off her tongue. I raised my rifle and she let go. Thirty-two rounds of 7.62mm ammunition slammed into the Brute's head at 905 meters per second. Each kick of the rifle hurt my chest even more, but the result was worth it. It dropped to the floor, its face a bloody mess.

I ran over to the marine to check on her. Her arm was bent in an awkward angle, and she seemed stunned. I checked her tags. PFC Jill Winters.

"Private, you need to stay here. I'll make a call to a medic and they'll patch you up."

She attempted to stand up, instantly fell down, wincing and clutch her arm. "Yeah, I think I'll just stay here. But not because you ordered me to, Spartan."

I chuckled and made the call. I turned back to the others, who had just finished off the last Brute. Simon reloaded his shotgun nonchalantly.

"Glad you guys made it. I have some C10-" he motioned to a small olive drab sack with several little blocks of the explosive inside. "- and we need to get behind their lines without being noticed. Now I found a tunnel that leads out of the building. Yes, thank, thank you!" He took a mock bow.

"So where does it lead?" Jacob asked as he recovered his knife from a Brute carcass.

"No clue."

If it leads to the Covenant lines like you think, they may figure out about it and use it. We need to close this off, or else we run the risk of them coming from underneath us."

Simon paused. "What if you closed it behind us?"

"What!?" Hannah asked incredulously. "And leave you guys to die?"

"We'd find a way back. Those tanks are more important though. We have to take them out, or else once we're gone, they'll just harass another group of marines who won't have us-" Simon motioned to each of us, "-with them. Then, they will die. So, this is probably the best chance to seriously cripple the Covenant in New Mombasa and give other groups an opportunity to get out of the city."

Jacob was impassive behind his red visor.

"If it means anything, Jacob, I'm all for it," Austin piped up, walking closer to stand next to Simon.

Jacob turned to me. "What do you think? I'm not sending you guys in unless you're absolutely sure you can do this."

I glanced at Hannah. I could definitely imagine her biting her lip behind her gold visored EVA helmet. Then, she nodded.

"You betcha. We're all in."

The tunnel wasn't very big. In fact, it could barely fit us due to the bulk of our armor. We had to turn off our shields or else we had no chance of fitting. But one by one, Austin, Simon, and I began to crawl through the dark.

"Just let us know when you're clear, so we can blow it," Jacob said as he closed the hatch on the tunnel. "And good luck."

"Try everything you can to get back to us, alright?" Hannah asked in a pleading voice. "For support, that is."

I cracked a smile underneath my helmet and kept crawling. The newly bolted on ODST chest plate on my armor kept scratching the walls.

"Darren, you're making too much freaking noise!" Simon muttered from his position in front of Austin.

"Well excuse me for having an extra hunk of metal bolted on my chest!"

"Excuse _me_ then, for even bothering to fix it!"

"Guys," Austin said in a whisper from in front of me. "C'mon, this is stupid. We need to find an exit. Focus on the walls for a switch, or button."

We continued on in silence for a good ten minutes, the tunnel arching up before dipping down again. Slowly, the tunnel began to ramp up. The sound of firing mortars gradually became more apparent, and eventually, deafening. We were right next to the tanks. Then-

"Found it!" Simon whispered in excitement as he pointed at a small red button.

"Sweet." I said and opened the team comm. "Jacob, we found the exit. You're good the blow the tunnel. Out."

"Copy."

Behind us, a large boom suddenly echoed down the tunnel.

"Looks like we're on our own now guys," Simon said. "Let's get to work." And he pressed the button.

What's up everybody? Just added a little bit more to this chapter because I felt the flow didn't go together well. So, here you go! Until next time, R&R!

19. Saboteurs

0730 Hours, November 24, 2552

New Mombasa, Africa

A circular metal hatch swung up, letting the sunlight in- or what was left of it. Simon slowly lifted his head to ground level, and then quickly lowered it. He raised an arm, pointed to the hole, and waved forward. He quickly jumped out of the hole and onto the street. Austin quickly followed, with me close behind.

Right next to us was the row of Wraiths. I quickly crouched down, expecting to be spotted. But there were no gunners on these tanks. They kept firing, not even aware of the danger that was less than five meters. The heat from the plasma even made it through my armor. Apparently the tanks' drivers thought they were safe. They were dead wrong.

I allowed myself a devious grin.

Simon waved to us and we both sprinted over to his position; a large truck that had wrecked into a nearby building.

"OK, Austin, you're the expert in this department, so you set the

charges. Darren and I will cover you, alright?"

Austin nodded his head emphatically. Simon handed the bag of explosives to him. Austin happily accepted the C10 sack and cradled it like it was a baby.

"With this, I will blow up the world!"

"Uh-oh," I murmured. "I think you just made a serious mistake, Simon."

He shrugged. "Beats me blowing us up trying to set the charges. Plus, as I always say, he's less of a target."

I laughed.

"Well, when you say it like thatâ€¦"

Austin slung his BR over his shoulder and ran over to the back of the first tank.

"Keep an eye out Darren, could be patrols nearby. I think I saw some Grunts when I looked around up here, but I don't know where they went. I'll sweep and look for them. Stay here and protect Austin," Simon said, sweeping back and forth with his shotgun as he moved through the cars.

I nodded and raised my rifle, scanning the area around us. The street was oddly silent except for the oddly rhythmic mortars. Even though it was still early in the day, with the towers around us blocking the sun, I was still able to see exceptionally well due to my augmentations. Which means that when the first bright red plasma round came flying at my visor, I was able to see it in fine detail. I dove to the ground behind the nearby truck.

"Contact!" I yelled, and leaned to the side of the truck to get a better look. Plasma washed over my armor. My shield bar flashed red, and a loud klaxon filled my ears. I jerked back into cover and fired a random burst one-handed at the source.

"I'm pinned down! Simon, do you see 'em?" I fired another burst over my head.

"Just hold on! I see them. A Brute and two Grunts. Piece of cake."

"Sooner would definitely be better than later, man!"

The roar of a few shotgun blasts permeated the air. Then, it got quiet.

"I got them. All clear."

"Thanks. I owe you."

Simon walked over, making sure to kick each corpse as he passed them. "Yeah, I know. What else is new?"

I shook my head and rose from cover as gold energy flowed around my armor, the shields slowly charging. "More probably heard that."

Austin, you need to get a move on. How close are you to being done?"

"Three charges placed. Got some ways to go. Moving to- hold up." He paused. Then, a note of panic entered his voice. "Guys, you need to move. _Now._"

At first I was extremely confused. Then I noticed it. The former monotonous _thooms_ of the mortars had gone silent. Simon and I slowly turned to the wall of Wraiths, all of which had turned to face us.

"Oh manâ€¦ This is gonna suck!"

Simon and I jumped over the car as they all fired at once. The shockwave pushed us into the air and sent me into a friendly nearby traffic light. The air I had left in my lungs from the explosion whooshed out of my lungs as my stomach met the light. Even though I was wearing armor, it still hurt like heck. My chest exploded into pain as the burn on my chest made its presence known as well. I hung there limply for a second, then, before I could catch myself, I swung off the light and slammed into the ground, cracking the duracrete.

I yelled out in pain as black poppies burst in front of my eyes, and my vision darkened. Then, I saw a blue hand reach out.

"What is with you and injuries man? It's like you're freaking trying to get hurt."

I tried to say something witty to retort, but I didn't have any air in my lungs, so instead I spluttered and coughed. Any air I breathed in felt like it was burning my lungs. I reached out and grabbed his hand just as I heard a familiar _whoosh_. Except multiplied by ten. Simon yanked me out of my self-made crater and into a nearby building. I glanced back. Every single mortar had struck exactly where I had been sitting.

Simon yanked me up and shoved me forward through the bottom floor of the building. "Take a breath for a second. They might have lost us. I'm gonna search for an exit."

I nodded in thanks and glanced around.

Before the invasion, the place had been a hair salon. The chairs had been overturned, with plasma burns in the walls. There were pictures of beautiful people with amazing haircuts smiling from every direction. But, a plasma shot had been burned into every single one of them. Maybe the Grunts had gotten overzealous?

The darkness filling the room seemed unnatural. This place had been full of life once. Now thanks to the Covenant, this place was full of destruction. Just another reason to hate them.

I flinched involuntarily as I heard the Wraiths open fire again. The building across the street burst into blue flame before smoke began pouring out of the windows. The whine of the anti-gravity generators grew louder as the Wraiths came closer as they went down the street.

There was one door in the room, and as I looked at it, Simon kicked

it open. Behind the door was a broom closet, with mops and other assorted cleaning materials. But no exit. Simon frantically ran through the building, looking for another way out. Finding none, Simon punched a mirror in frustration. The mirror disintegrated.

"There's got to be another way out! There has to be!"

But we both knew the truth. The only way out was out through the front door.

Directly into the path of the Wraiths.

20. Charge!

0800 Hours, November 24, 2552

New Mombasa, Africa

I like to take pride in the fact that not many things scare me.

Brutes? No big deal. They were tough and ugly, but they were still killable. Jackals? They sucked, but were easy to kill. Hunters? The jury was still out on that one. I still needed to face down one of them to see. And Grunts? Please. But almost nothing terrified me more than when a Wraith came even with the salon and turned toward us.

It's energy projector glowed as it prepared to deliver its fatal payload into the salon. In a blur of movement, I grabbed Simon and yanked him to the floor behind a counter. The scene seemed to freeze for a moment. The Wraith stared us down as we huddled behind the flimsy, cheap, counter. I could hear my heart beating in my chest.

Then, a flash of light filled the room, with a loud and thunderous boom following closer behind. I closed my eyes. This was it. After only one mission, we were dead. Sad Spartan I turned out to be. Another explosion. And another.

I opened my eyes. The explosions weren't coming from inside the store. They were coming from outside it. I raised my head above the counter. The Wraith that had been taking aim at us was a flaming, blue husk. A giant hole had ripped through the back of it from the explosion. Even now, explosions were still going off. Then it hit me.

"What's happening man? Tell me!" Simon said from behind the relative safety of the counter.

"It's Austin! I guess he planted the charges. I completely forgot about him! Dang he works fast. We should probably head out there. Ready to go?"

Simon nodded and grabbed his shotgun from where he had dropped it on the floor during his search for an exit. "Lets go." Another explosion helped put a period to his sentence.

The Wraiths were going in every direction, firing randomly into the buildings and around them, no doubt perplexed and terrified by the explosions that had taken out their brethren.

Another mortar landed next to us as we ran out to the street. All of the glass in the salon blew out, while a shockwave sent us flying into the middle of the street. Another explosion went off, a Wraith suddenly disappearing into orange and red. I pushed myself to my feet. Beside me, Simon did the same.

I heard a loud roar come from down the street. I turned to look- just in time to be punched in the face by a clawed hand. Although the armor deadened the blow it freaking hurt! I saw stars for a second, and rolled just in time to dodge another brutal smash that would definitely have caved in my chest, armor or no armor. I heard Simon's shotgun blasting at something as well as shouting, but I ignored it, feeling adrenaline run through my system. My shield's klaxon rang out in my ears as I brought up my pistol and fired on reflex.

The Brute, who had been the attacker, deftly dodged the round with a surprising speed despite its heavy mass, and raised its Spiker to fire. I reached forward and yanked at the rifle, trying to dislodge the Brute's grip on it. I managed to force it down, and a few spikes hit the ground and bounced away, hitting nothing. The Brute roared, covering my visor in spittle from its mouth.

I kicked its knees, but it could have been done by a small child for all the good it did. The Brute laughed and kicked me in the chest. I managed to let all the air out of my lungs before the impact so that I could breath, but my chest burned again. I flew into a dumpster and slid limply to the ground.

It's like they're all trying to hit me there! I thought to myself as I clenched my teeth, my burnt chest now constantly throbbing. My pistol was somehow still in my hand. I aimed and fired at the Brute again, but once again, it sidestepped, this time using its momentum to pull itself into a roll in my direction. I emptied the clip into it, finally connecting, but to no effect.

I ducked sideways and ran into a Grunt right as the Brute collided with the car. The Grunt gave a squeal of surprise and tried to lower its pistol to my head. I grabbed its arm and threw it into the Brute. The Brute didn't hesitate, and cut down the Grunt in mid-air with the blades of its weapon. I winced.

I grabbed the plasma pistol from where it had fallen and charged it, aiming it at the Brute. It roared and started to charge again. If it hadn't already been bezerking before, it definitely was now.

I waited for it to come to me, the pistol now shaking in my hands from the overcharged shot within it. Just as it reached me, I sidestepped, shot the pistol, and jumped to the side in a fluid motion. There was a flash of green, a roar, and suddenly, I was on the ground, gasping for breath a good ten feet from where I had been. The plasma pistol was gone, knocked out of my hand. And my burn felt like crap.

I turned back to the Brute as soon as I had gotten back my breath. The Brute was lying on the ground, half of its face melted off. It didn't move.

Suddenly, a blob of green flew past my head and I quickly found cover behind an overturned trashcan. Up the street was a squad of Grunts and a Brute, who were opening fire on Simon. He was behind a car, firing over his head, his shield flaring as spikes bounced off of his armor. The Grunts weren't hitting him, but they were keeping him pinned. Behind them, two more squads were rapidly approaching. The Wraiths though, were still on their rampage. As I watched, another burst into flame. The heat washed over me.

Where was Austin anyway? I glanced at the buildings that loomed above me. No sign of him. I shrugged. Wherever he was, it was safer than here.

I reached over my shoulder for my rifle only to find that it wasn't there. _Must have gotten lost in that fight_. I dove over to the Brute's corpse, and with a whoop of excitement, found what I was looking for: the Brute's Spiker. I grabbed a few drum magazines from a belt around its chest and loaded one into the gun. It weighed a ton, but I quickly lifted up a second hand to stabilize it. That helped. I sighted in the rifle on the squad firing on Simon and opened fire.

A line of red-hot spikes shot out and impaled a Grunt through the chest and then went wide. I shifted my aim again, and succeeded in killing two more Grunts before they started firing at me as well. Simon took the chance leapt over the car, shields fully charged and shotgun loaded. He blasted the remaining two Grunts apart, leaving blue blood and methane all over the pavement before unloading three shells into the Brute. With a loud yell of pain, it fell to the ground. Simon ran over, planted the gun to its face, and fired. The head exploded, thoroughly terminating the chance that the beast would get back up.

Another squad finally reached us, but just before they opened fire, a Wraith boosted forward and took them out, crushing them beneath its gravity generators. Then, the hatch of the Wraith opened. Austin popped his head out of the tank and waved.

"Last ride back to the headquarters! You should hurry before you lose your chance! Be sure to have your tickets and-"

Simon swiped at him, but he ducked, chuckling. "Okay, okay. Sorry."

"How theâ€¦|" I asked incredulously as I gaped at the giant tank Austin was sitting on.

"No time. Get on. I'm afraid there's no room for more than two, so someone has to sit on the sides or in the turret."

"Dibs on turret!" Simon yelled as he jumped into the turret on the tank.

"Screw you guys," I said as I stepped on and took a seat on the right wing of the vehicle, driving a few holes into it with my left hand to hold onto. "Screw you."

"Love you too, Darren. And now-" Austin produced a detonator and pressed the button on it. All of the remaining tanks suddenly

disappeared into numerous explosions, some white hot with blue mixed in, others with the usual red and orange. "Let's go!"

He disappeared under the hatch again and the tank glided forward. The mortar fired and took out the remaining squad in the street ahead and then boosted forward through the edge of the shield.

Covenant troops were everywhere, but they seemed like they couldn't believe what they were seeing. Austin fired the mortar again, incinerating two Hunters and a pack of Brutes, and Simon opened up with the turret. I began to open fire with my Spiker as well. An unfortunate Grunt fell in front of us and was crushed. A line of plasma drilled a Brute who had dove to the side to avoid us. A Revenant ahead of us was blasted into oblivion. Spikes appeared, stitching a line through a small group of Jackals. It was pure chaos for the Covenant.

We were about halfway back to the Police HQ when they finally began to recover from the shock of one of their tanks suddenly on a rampage and began to open fire. A line of pink crystals arced through the crowd in front of us and hit my helmet, rebounding into the air or being destroyed on impact. The alarm sounded in my helmet as I tried to make myself less of a target, hoping nothing would hit me.

I reloaded frantically with one hand, stumbling with the magazine and making sure the blades of the alien weapon were not anywhere close to me. I reached back out to fire again and in a split second, the rifle was yanked out of my hand as the blade caught onto the head of a nearby Brute who was attempting to board us. I cursed to myself in frustration. There went my only weapon. Again.

I looked forward again. We were almost out of the shield, less than fifty meters between freedom and us.

I could hear some of the remaining ODSTs in the building cheering and whooping over the radio as Austin set off an energy reserve nearby us. Plasma rolled into the sky thirty feet in the air. Even with my visor darkening, I had to shield my eyes.

"You guys sure do know how to make some great fireworks," Jacob commented over the team comm, "I bet others heard that blocks away from here."

I flashed a spartan smile at the building as we slowly approached the edge of the shield.

Bang!

The Wraith suddenly grumbled unnaturally, settling to the ground with a cloud of black smoke coiling up from the cockpit. Austin sprang out of the hatch; his normally white and black armor was covered in soot and melted blue machinery.

"Get out! Fuel Rod got us! This thing's about to-"

I saw a flash of white and suddenly I was flipping through the air, weightless. With a flick of a switch I locked my armor. The gel underneath the main armor suddenly hardened, providing pressure everywhere. Then I hit the ground. Since I was locked in, I rolled similar to a pin in that had been hit by a bowling ball. My shields

went down, and red alert lights sounded over my helmet's speakers. Sparks flew as I finally stopped rolling and slid further down the street. I came to a sudden stop when I crashed into a friendly nearby hydrant. Water gushed from the opening, but the heavy armor over me kept me in place.

I turned off the locked armor, and the solid gel returned to its gel form. I sighed in relief as the pressure ceased. My shields recharged. I was alive. The sensation of relief was suddenly punctured by panic. Where were Austin and Simon? Their health monitors were going haywire.

I hopped to my feet, a little dizzy. I had been blasted forward, luckily, and I was thirty meters from the edge of the shield. I looked back. The Wraith was a mass of melted and burning alien metal. Beside the Wraith were two small, blackened forms, one of which was struggling to get up and failing. A small group of Jackals and Skirmishers were walking forward in their birdlike style, twitching back and forth, a few Carbines and Plasma Pistols in their hands. They were going to discover Austin and Simon any second.

I leapt forward, scooping up a Needler and Plasma Grenade from the hands of a dead Grunt from our charge and firing on the Jackals. The needles tracked and lodged successfully into a number of Jackals, who shrieked in fear and pain as the shards exploded. The remaining Jackals activated their shield gauntlets while the Skirmishers leapt away, looking for a higher elevation to attack from.

I reloaded the gun with a flick of my wrist and unleashed another flurry of needles into the now armored group, who had formed into a phalanx. The needles bounced off, landing among the buildings next to us. I cursed again as a grouping of green plasma sizzled past me and into the ground. I primed the plasma grenade and tossed it, followed up by a frag. I opened fire again as the Jackals dove to the sides, desperately trying to avoid the explosives.

Only one managed to escape the double explosion. The rest were ripped apart from the combination of shrapnel and heat. I charged the Jackal, whose pistol had been ripped away in the explosion. It reared its fist back and punched me in the helmet. It shrieked in agony as its hand broke against the hard shields of my armor. I grinned grimly, and launched a lightning fast punch. The Jackal's face caved in, and it dropped limply to the ground. A few more blobs of plasma flew past me, but I ignored them.

I leapt over the wreckage of a car and ran over to Simon and Austin. Simon was struggling to remove a heavy piece of debris from on top of him, but even with his strength, he was not able to. Austin was not moving, lying over the same debris, adding his weight to the metal on top of Simon.

I reached over to Austin, grabbed him, and slowly picked him up, gently placing him to the side. Simon flung the debris off of him, and sprang to his feet, drawing his pistol when he discovered that his shotgun was not with him.

"Is he alright?" He asked as I checked over Austin. His armor was covered in blue and black, with a black hole the size of a fist blown into the left chest plate. I heard a wheeze as Austin struggled to breath. He was awake, but he was going into shock.

"He has a punctured lung, from the sound of his breathing. We need to get him back to Hannah. Fast."

"Simon, what the heck is going on down there?" I heard Jacob ask over the com. "Darren? Austin? Somebody say something!"

"Hit a snag, Jacob. Austin is down. We're gonna make a dash for the edge of the shield. We need cover when we exfil. Copy?"

"Copy," Jacob said, determination in his voice. "If you can't make it, don't hesitate to call for help. We'll be out in a flash. We're in the middle of the evac right now. Kara and Hannah will cover you. Burke and I will handle evac."

"Yes sir. We'll get it done."

A large bang punctuated the air to put a period to his sentence. The bang reverberated off of the buildings around us, creating an ominous quiet. Then I realized something. The reason we had been able to charge through the Covenant's lines so easily was because there were less than before. The Skirmishers from earlier had not come back. In fact, it seemed like we weren't being pursued at all anymore. I peered over the edge of the wreckage. A Brute was waving on its pack as they boarded a Phantom. It looked over, saw me staring at it, then smiled an apish smile. The vehicle slowly ascended into the air and took off into the clouds.

There were no more Covenant left! They had all retreated into the skies. But that left one question: Why? The answer came when the early morning sun darkened over us. We looked up. In the airspace over the HQ was a large Covenant supercarrier. My jaw opened in shock. The bang had actually been the slipspace rupture of the carrier arriving at its target. Us.

"Run!" I yelled, scooping up Austin in my arms, sprinting to the edge of the shield. Simon joined me, grabbing Austin from my arms in mid-stride, and continuing at a much faster pace than the one I had been going at. He reached the edge of the shield five seconds before I did. I could hear the whine of the giant plasma projector above us begin to charge as I exited the shield. I could see Kara and Hannah in the doorway, waving us on desperately. Seeing Hannah made me shift into high gear, desperately trying to reach the door. My vision narrowed.

I could feel energy all around me. Static filled my comm as I leapt into the foyer. I yanked off my helmet as the HUD fizzled into nothing. Hannah, Kara, and Simon with Austin on his shoulder were just ahead of me. I glanced back to the windows. They were slowly turning white, and since I had my helmet off, it nearly blinded me. I screamed and jumped into the narrow passageway, desperately trying to reach the evac.

Suddenly, a pit opened up in front of us, with ropes coiling deep into the darkness below. I slammed my helmet back on. I jumped with all of my strength and grabbed one of the lines. Sparks flew from my hands as I descended into the darkness. A loud bang sounded above me. The passageway started to brighten as the energy on the surface slowly melted through the building above us.

"Jump! We won't make it in time if we don't!" I heard Hannah yell over the now deafening whine of the ship's projector. I looked up again. The white energy was getting closer. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw the others begin to fall from their lines, with Simon already shielding Austin from the future impact.

I froze. Heights. I looked into the oily darkness beneath me and actually let out a whimper. I looked up at the slowly building energy above me, and back down the now seemingly bottomless chasm. But the choice was made for me in an instant. The rope I was holding gave way, and with a short, surprised scream, I fell into our evac, the New Mombasa sublevels.

****Author's Note:****

****Hey guys, it's me again. Just wanted to ask you guys to keep reviewing! It really keeps me going! And more importantly, I need serious criticism if you got it. I seem to have trouble with writing these action chapters and I feel like the pace of the action is slower than I'd like. So if you feel like you have some good advice, send it over ASAP. Thanks, and once again, R&R!****

End
file.